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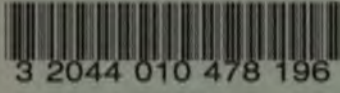
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THE TEACHERS OF EMERSON



THE TEACHERS OF EMERSON

BY

JOHN S. HARRISON, Ph. D.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN HENYON COLLEGE

New York
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1910

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In Memoriam
WILLIAM OGDEN HARRISON
MARCH 12, 1909



PREFACE

The aim of this work is to show the essentially Platonic quality of Emerson's thought. It is often held that his transcendentalism has its source in the philosophy of Germany, and that his mysticism is an inheritance from the sacred books of the East. But a careful study has convinced the author that Greek thought has been the most important factor in Emerson's intellectual development. Beneath the surface of his days and years there ran a spirit of philosophic inquiry which was fed by repeated readings in the old philosophers of Greece. From these sons of light he drank in large draughts of intellectual day. The author has attempted to show this by a comparative study of Emerson and the Platonists.

In his studies the author has been helped by the labors of Dr. E. W. Emerson, whose edition of the *Complete Works* of Emerson has afforded many valuable suggestions regarding Emerson's acquaintance with the old philosophers. James Elliot Cabot's *Memoir*



PREFACE

and Charles Eliot Norton's edition of the *Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle* have also been helpful. For the use which the author has made of these three works, he takes pleasure in thanking the publishers, Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, who kindly granted the necessary permission. To the generosity of Mr. Thomas M. Johnson, of Osceola, Missouri, the author is greatly indebted. It was from him that the rare volumes of the Platonists were obtained. For his kindness in lending these absolutely essential books the author expresses warmest thanks.

JOHN S. HARRISON.

GAMBIER, OHIO, March 24, 1910.



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EMERSON**

BY

JOHN S. HARRISON, Ph. D.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH IN BENVON COLLEGE

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THE TEACHERS OF EMERSON





THE TEACHERS OF EMERSON

CHAPTER I

EMERSON'S PLATONISM

THE mind of Emerson may best be studied from the standpoint of Platonism. If one examines the chief centers of his teaching to be found in his conception of nature, soul, love and beauty, art, and mythology, he will find that Emerson in his most characteristic utterances is indebted to Plato and the Platonists. In those great intellectual teachers Emerson found a body of thought which he so thoroughly appropriated that to understand the character of his mind it is necessary to watch it consciously forming itself in keeping with the main trend of Platonic speculation.

The Platonism, however, which is thus ascendent in Emerson's thought, is not identified with the body of philosophical doctrine

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which present-day scholarship assigns to Plato and which for English readers is presented in the volumes of Jowett's translation (1871). Those volumes came to Emerson's shelves, but so late in life as to find him with his work already done. It was the fruits of an earlier era of Platonic scholarship that Emerson enjoyed. In the complete translation of Plato made by Thomas Taylor (1804) and in his earlier translation, *The Cratylus, Phædo, Parmenides, and Timæus of Plato* (1793) Emerson found a rendering of Plato and an interpretation of his doctrine that identified Platonism with the final stage of Hellenic speculation now named Neo-Platonism. The center of that new philosophy was Plotinus and the great commentator and expounder of its doctrines was Proclus. Taylor esteemed the thinking of these men, especially of Proclus, all important in the right interpretation of Plato, and to render Plato in an English dress "unattended with his Greek interpreters in the same garb," Taylor assured his readers in his Dedication, is to act "like one who gives an invaluable casket, but without the only key by which it can be unlocked." Later the Bohn translation of Plato (1848) came into Emerson's hands, but in spite of



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its aim to present Plato without "the absurd mysticism and fanatical extravagances which the New Platonists introduced in their interpretations,"¹ it was not able to counteract the effects of Emerson's earlier readings in Taylor's edition; Emerson still remained at heart a sympathizer with the manner of the later school of Platonism.

His readings in other translations of Thomas Taylor are proof of the attraction which the writings of the Platonists had for him. The *Select Works of Plotinus*, *On the Theology of Plato* by Proclus, *The Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* by the same, *The Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians* by Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras* by the same, to which is added a *Collection of Pythagoric Sentences*, the treatise *On the Nature of the Universe* by Ocellus Lucanus, were all translations by Thomas Taylor with which Emerson was familiar. All but the last two he had in his own library at Concord. In them he found a mass of comment culled by Taylor from obscure Platonists. To the *Select Works of Plotinus* was appended an extract from the treatise of Synesius *On Providence*, which Emerson con-

¹ II., General Introduction, p. 1.

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sidered "one of the majestic remains of literature."¹ Generally throughout these Taylor translations and especially in the writings of Proclus, Emerson found frequent mention of Chaldean, or Zoroastrian, Oracles. Taylor published a collection of them in the *Classical Journal* for 1817 and 1818. These oracles were esteemed by Proclus as genuine fragments of wisdom. Emerson, however, made no inquiry into their genuineness; not caring, he said, "whether they are genuine antiques or modern counterfeits, as I am only concerned with the good sentences, and it is indifferent how old a truth is."² Emerson read Porphyry also along with other books, "to pass away the cold and rainy season" of 1841.³ The work of this author must have been Taylor's translation of Porphyry's *Select Works*. The substance of Porphyry's life of Plotinus was available for him in Taylor's introduction to the *Select Works of Plotinus*. With *The Divine Pymander of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus* in the translation made of the work by Dr. Everard in 1650, Emerson also

¹ *Complete Works*, VII., 202.

² J. E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I., 290, 291.

³ *Ibid.*, II., 449.

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had an acquaintance. His reading led him into a translation of the *Akhlak-I-Jalaly* made by W. F. Thomson (1839), which was the medium through which the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle got into Mahometism. With Taylor's translation of Sallust *On the Gods and the World* Emerson may also have been familiar, for he quotes from it in *Nature*. He had Taylor's translation of *The Pythagoric Sentences of Demophilus*. He probably availed himself of the other translations of Plotinus made by Thomas Taylor—*Five Books of Plotinus*, *On Suicide*, and *An Essay on the Beautiful*—though no reference by name to these works appear in Emerson. Emerson's reading in the Neo-Platonists was then as vital a thing as his reading in Plato and his indebtedness to these writers must never be forgotten in explaining his conception of Platonism.

For the man whose life labors made possible the enjoyment of these obscure philosophers Emerson has the highest praise. "There are also prose poets," he writes. "Thomas Taylor, the Platonist, for instance, is really a better man of imagination, a better poet, or perhaps I should say a better feeder

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to a poet, than any man between Milton and Wordsworth.”¹ During his visits to England Emerson was constantly inquiring of the men he met whether they had read Taylor. And it was incredible, so he told Wordsworth, that no one in all England knew anything of Thomas Taylor, “whilst in every American library his translations are found.”² Such remarks testify to the importance which Emerson attached to Taylor’s work.

The effect of these readings in the Neo-Platonists appears in Emerson’s adoption of their manner of interpreting Plato. They consider the highest idea in Plato’s scheme of metaphysics the idea of the One as it is treated in the *Parmenides*. They identify this idea with that of the Good which in the *Republic* Plato explains is the highest reality. Thus Thomas Taylor, reflecting their method of criticism, writes: “Of all the dogmas of Plato, that concerning the first principle of things as far transcends in sublimity the doctrine of other philosophers of a different sect, on this subject, as this supreme cause of all transcends other causes. For, according to Plato, the highest God, whom in the *Republic* he calls

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 50.

² *Ibid.*, V., 295.



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the good, and in the Parmenides *the one*, is not only above soul and intellect, but is even superior to being itself. Hence, since everything which can in any respect be known, or of which anything can be asserted, must be connected with the universality of things, but the first cause is above all things, it is very properly said by Plato to be perfectly ineffable. The first hypothesis therefore of his Parmenides, in which all things are denied of this immense principle, concludes as follows: '*The one* therefore *is* in no respect. So it seems. Hence it is not in such a manner as *to be one*, for thus it would be *being*, and participate of *essence*: but as it appears, *the one* neither *is one*, nor *is*, if it be proper to believe in reasoning of this kind. It appears so. But can anything either belong to, or be affirmed of that which is not? How can it? Neither therefore does any *name* belong to it, nor *discourse*, nor any *science*, nor *sense*, nor *opinion*. It does not appear that there can. Hence it can neither be *named*, nor *spoken of*, nor *conceived by opinion*, nor be *known*, nor *perceived* by any being. So it seems.'"¹

Emerson follows this manner of reviewing

¹ *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, I., Introduction, p. 5.

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Plato's system. In his essay on *Plato* he thus sets forth Plato's conception of the highest postulate of thought: "Plato apprehended the cardinal facts. He could prostrate himself on the earth and cover his eyes whilst he adored that which cannot be numbered, or gauged, or known, or named; that of which everything can be affirmed and denied; that 'which is entity and nonentity.' He called it super-essential. He even stood ready, as in the *Parmenides*, to demonstrate that it was so—that this Being exceeded the limits of intellect. No man ever more fully acknowledged the Ineffable."¹

Modern criticism does not accept this view of the *Parmenides*. Scholars no longer interpret Plato from the standpoint of the Neo-Platonists. They consider the *Parmenides* either as a dialectical exercise or as a subtle attempt of Plato to criticise the earlier Eleatic philosophy from the standpoint of Zeno.² Consequently they do not co-ordinate the conception of the One given in the *Parmenides* with the idea of the Good as elaborated in the *Republic*. Into the soundness or weakness of

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 61.

² *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, III., 225, 227.



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such interpretation it is not necessary here to enter; it is sufficient to appreciate the difference and to point out Emerson's adherence to the older school of criticism.

In contrast to this idea of an ineffable unity of things Emerson places the conception of a dialectic, the aim of which is to give scientific knowledge; and this dialectic he maintains Plato elaborated. Thus his exposition goes on to say: "Having paid his homage, as for the human race, to the Illimitable, he (Plato) then stood erect, and for the human race affirmed, 'And yet things are knowable!'—that is, the Asia in his mind was first heartily honored—the ocean of love and power, before form, before will, before knowledge, the Same, the Good, the One; and now, refreshed and empowered by this worship, the instinct of Europe, namely, culture, returns; and he cries, 'Yet things are knowable!' They are knowable, because being from one, things correspond. There is a scale; and the correspondence of heaven to earth, of matter to mind, of the part to the whole, is our guide. As there is a science of stars, called astronomy; a science of quantities, called mathematics; a science of qualities, called chemistry; so there is a science of sciences—I call it



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Dialectic—which is the Intellect discriminating the false and the true. It rests on the observation of identity and diversity; for to judge is to unite to an object the notion which belongs to it.”¹

This is a doctrine of the *Republic* and truthfully reflects Plato's work. The Neo-Platonists of course accepted it and worked it into their mystical scheme although they held to the former idea of an ineffable One as the superior conception. That is, in Neo-Platonism one finds a mystical system arising out of an idealistic philosophy. The conception of a science based on the knowledge of ideas gave them idealism and truthfully reflected Plato. The conception of an ineffable unity of things above all knowledge necessitated a mysticism; and this they professed to find in Plato. Such criticism Emerson accepted and hence the strong Neo-Platonic strain in his appreciation of Platonism.

Emerson's Platonism is broad enough, too, to take in not only the Neo-Platonists but also the earlier thinkers of Greece from Thales on who antedate the appearance of Plato. In these thinkers he found a crude symbolical

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 62.



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explanation of the absolute cause of things which Neo-Platonism had taught him to consider above all knowledge. "The baffled intellect," he says, "must still kneel before this cause, which refuses to be named—ineffable cause, which every fine genius has essayed to represent by some emphatic symbol, as, Thales by water, Anaximenes by air, Anaxagoras by (*Noûs*) thought, Zoroaster by fire, Jesus and the moderns by love; and the metaphor of each has become a national religion."¹

Plato when viewed in connection with these earlier Greek speculators is considered by Emerson as the perfect expression of that which they but inadequately stated; he gave a scientific account of what had before been uttered symbolically. "Before Pericles came the Seven Wise Masters," he writes, "and we have the beginnings of geometry, metaphysics and ethics; then the partialists—deducing the origin of things from flux or water, or from air, or from fire, or from mind. All mix with these causes mythologic pictures. At last comes Plato, the distributor, who needs no barbaric paint, or tattoo, or whooping; for he can define. He leaves with Asia the vast

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 72-73.

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and superlative; he is the arrival of accuracy and intelligence. 'He shall be as a god to me, who can rightly divide and define.'"¹

In thus estimating the place of this early speculation in the evolution of Greek thought Emerson was developing to its utmost a practice of Plato and the Platonists. In both are found open critiques of the earlier philosophers. In Plotinus there is frequent reference to the ancients and no opportunity is lost by Proclus to identify the teaching of the early schools with Platonism. And in Plato Emerson found a criticism that set the old thought in vivid contrast to Plato's own conceptions. In the *Sophist* the main speaker reviews the preceding philosophers and declares that "each of them has related a fable to us, as being boys."² This is the identical position that Emerson takes regarding the early Hellenic thinkers.

Into the thought of these Greek thinkers before Plato, Emerson was curious to inquire. In Plutarch's *Morals* he found a rich mine of quotation and comment in which the earlier Greek philosophers figure conspicuously.

¹ *Ibid.*, IV., 47.

² *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, III., 240.



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“Plutarch occupies a unique place in literature,” Emerson writes, “as an encyclopædia of Greek and Roman antiquity. Whatever is eminent in fact or in fiction, in opinion, in character, in institutions, in science—natural, moral or metaphysical—or in memorable sayings, drew his attention and came to his pen with more or less fulness of record. He is, among prose writers, what Chaucer is among English poets, a repertory for those who want the story without searching for it at first hand—a compend of all accepted traditions.”¹ In the English Cudworth, too, Emerson found many fragments of ancient thought. The work of this Cambridge Platonist of the seventeenth century—*The True Intellectual System of the Universe*—was perhaps the first book to draw Emerson’s attention to Platonism.² He read it for the “citations from Plato and the philosophers,”³ but found the body of the work dull reading, relieved only by the “magazine of quotations, of extraordinary ethical sentences, the shining summits of ancient philosophy.”⁴ Emerson

¹ *Complete Works*, X., 297.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 294.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, X., 516.

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which all things, the first cause being excepted, are composed.”¹

Emerson had consulted De Gérando's *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie* for a knowledge of Pythagorean beliefs and he had found there an account of the series of elements comprising the universe. The idea was at once taken up, for it chimed in with a favorite way of looking at things even from boyhood when “he pleased himself as he lay on his bed with the beauty of the Lord's equilibrium in the Universe.”²

His reading in Cousin, however, may have had the effect of clinching this idea so that it became a fixed one in his mind as he continued his study of the Platonists. Emerson tells us in 1833 that he had been reading Cousin's lectures and he must have known them in a translation, an *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, made by H. G. Linberg (1832).³ In this work Cousin explains the categories of the reason and shows how all propositions are reduced to one proposition; “that is, to the opposition between unity and plurality, substance and phenomenon, being

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 432-433.

² *Complete Works*, I., Biographical Sketch, p. 39.

³ *Ibid.*, V., 21.



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the fifth London edition translated by several hands and published in 1718.

Pythagoreanism is the most conspicuous phase of ancient Greek thought antecedent to Plato which Emerson blends with his conception of Platonism. According to the Pythagoreans the universe is a harmony of antagonizing opposites, of which they gave a series of ten: limited and unlimited; odd and even; one and many; right and left; masculine and feminine; rest and motion; straight and crooked; light and darkness; good and evil; square and oblong. The series is an arbitrary mingling of mathematical, physical and ethical contrasts and is a deduction from their primary theory that number is the principle of things.

A trace of this way of looking at the constitution of the universe is found in Emerson's exposition of Plato's teaching. Plato's recognition of the ineffable unity of things, so Emerson holds, is grounded on the cardinal fact that unity, or identity, lies forever at the base of things. Along with it is the second fundamental conception, variety. "If speculation," he says, "tends thus to a terrific unity, in which all things are absorbed, action tends

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directly backwards to diversity. The first is the course or gravitation of mind; the second is the power of nature. Nature is the manifold. The unity absorbs, and melts or reduces. Nature opens and creates. These two principles reappear and interpenetrate all things, all thought; the one, the many. One is being; the other, intellect: one is necessity; the other freedom: one, rest; the other, motion: one, power; the other, distribution: one, strength; the other, pleasure: one, consciousness; the other, definition: one, genius; the other, talent: one, earnestness; the other, knowledge: one, possession; the other, trade: one, caste; the other, culture: one, king; the other, democracy: and, if we dare carry these generalizations a step higher, and name the last tendency of both, we might say, that the end of the one is escape from organization—pure science; and the end of the other is the highest instrumentality, or use of means, or executive deity.”¹ In such a catalogue the arbitrary balancing of opposites is quite in keeping with the Pythagorean series.

Emerson found authority for thus developing Plato's philosophy in the critical attitude of the Platonists toward Pythagorean

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 51-52.

notions. To the Platonists Pythagoras was an important name in the history of Hellenic thought. "The mathematical disciplines," says Taylor in his introductory remarks on Plato, "were invented by the Pythagoreans, in order to a reminiscence of divine concerns, to which through these as images, they endeavor to ascend."¹ Plato, he adds, teaches the same things through science. Such a view reflects the critical manner of Proclus. It is Pythagoric, according to him, to signify divine concerns through images.² And in his *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* he allegorizes Plato's account of the ancient war between the Atlantics and the Athenians in agreement with the Pythagorean notion of the antagonism of elements constituting the universe. Taylor summarizing the account states that such a view is doubtless to be preferred, as more consistent with the nature of the dialogue, for it refers the story of the Atlantic war "to the opposition perpetually flourishing in the universe between unity and multitude, bound and infinity, sameness and difference, motion and permanency, from

¹ *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, I., General Introduction, p. 37.

² *Ibid.*

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which all things, the first cause being excepted, are composed.”¹

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¹ *Ibid.*, II., 432-433.

² *Complete Works*, I., Biographical Sketch, p. 39.

³ *Ibid.*, V., 21.



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and appearance, identity and difference, and the like."¹ The relation of unity and multiplicity he dwells upon at some length. He explains that these two fundamental ideas are "two ideas contemporaneous in reason; two, which reason cannot be without, and which moreover arrive at the same time."² One cannot be conceived—he adds—without the other.

It is in the same strain that Emerson speaks. "We unite all things by perceiving the law that pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances. But every mental act—this very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the difference of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or think without embracing both."³

But whether Emerson is indebted to Cousin or not, his fondness for balancing antagonizing elements of thought is a characteristic of his interpretation of one phase of Platonism. And in so doing he was but following a habit of the Platonists themselves. As in all his appropriations from the philosophy of Plato,

¹ p. 113.

² p. 114.

³ *Complete Works*, IV., 48.

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he develops the idea of the Pythagoreans in characteristic fashion.

A third significant phase of Emerson's interpretation of Platonic doctrine is due to his acquaintance with the writings of Coleridge. In Coleridge's *Friend* Emerson found an account of a scientific method of thought which was built partly on the philosophy of Plato and partly on the teaching of Bacon. The aim of Coleridge's work in his own words was "to lay down and illustrate certain fundamental distinctions and rules of intellectual action, which, if well grounded and thoroughly taken up and appropriated, will give to every one the power of working out, under any circumstances, the conclusions of truth for himself."¹ In pursuing this aim Coleridge had examined many systems of thought and had finally ended in correlating the philosophy of Bacon with that of Plato. "Thus the difference, or rather distinction, between Plato and Lord Bacon," Coleridge tells us, "is simply this: that philosophy being necessarily bipolar, Plato treats principally of the truth, as it manifests itself at the ideal pole, as the science of intellect (*de mundo intel-*

¹ *The Friend. Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II. *Object and Plan of the Work*, p. 8.



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ligibili); while Bacon confines himself, for the most part, to the same truth, as it is manifested at the other or material pole, as the science of nature (*de mundo sensibili*). It is as necessary, therefore, that Plato should direct his inquiries chiefly to those objective truths that exist in and for the intellect alone, the images and representatives of which we construct for ourselves by figure, number, and word; as that Lord Bacon should attach his main concern to the truths which have their signatures in nature, and which (as he himself plainly and often asserts) may indeed be revealed to us through and with, but never by the senses, or the faculty of sense.”¹

Owing to his acceptance of this reconciliation of Plato and Bacon, Emerson adopted, as a fixed idea in all philosophic inquiry, the correlation of matter and mind. In accordance with that idea he studied Plato and the Platonists. The reading of Bacon was thus a congenial task to accompany his study of Plato. In Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* Emerson found a conception of a First Philosophy that easily blended with Plato's ideal of speculative inquiry. “Bacon, in the structure of his mind,” Emerson thus declares,

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 445.

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“held of the analogists, of the idealists, or
(as we popularly say, naming from the best
example) Platonists.”¹

And so it comes about that an inquiry into the working of Emerson's mind must consider the composite character of the Platonism on which that mind was feeding. The mysticism of Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists generally—Plotinus being the heart of the new school and the culmination of all Greek philosophy—the ancient thought of those early Greek philosophers preceding Plato, especially that of Pythagoras—Plato being considered as the logical outcome of their speculations—and finally, the contention of Coleridge that a philosophy of natural law such as Bacon's is the co-ordinate of a purely speculative theory of ideas—these are the three media through which the teachings of Plato were studied by Emerson and it should not appear strange if in him the light from Plato is somewhat refracted. Only by recognizing the character of the sources from which Emerson drew his material can we hope to understand the part which Platonism played in satisfying the needs of his mind.

A second consideration which must be

¹ *Complete Works*, V., 239.



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borne in mind in a right understanding of Emerson's relation to Plato and the Platonists is the manner of Emerson's reading. He was not a philosopher building up a system of thought. Hence he did not study the sources of his Platonism as a professed student of that philosophy whose chief aim is the understanding of all the minutiae of Platonic doctrine. It is impossible therefore to reconstruct from Emerson's writings a system of Platonism; his mind was constitutionally unfitted for the performance of such a task. His independent spirit, too, forbade such a proceeding. He used his books for their service to his own spiritual needs. "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system."¹ And thus in the reading of his Platonic books he attends only to those portions that appeal to him. "I think the Platonists may be read for sentences," he explains, "though the reader fails to grasp the argu-

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 89-90.



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ment of the paragraph or chapter. He may yet obtain gleams and glimpses of a more excellent illumination from their genius, out-valuing the most distinct information he owes to other books. For I hold that the grandeur of the impression the stars and heavenly bodies make on us is surely more valuable than our exact perception of a tub or a table on the ground.”¹ And yet such reading is not like the reading in the books he describes by the term *Vocabularies*, such as Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In such a book he occasionally found a fine sentence but “no high method, no inspiring efflux.”² And so in characterizing his manner of reading in the Platonists it must not be forgotten that he read sympathetically enough to catch the spirit of Platonism, even though he never mastered his sources as a professed student would have done.

It was also Emerson’s habit to index his books and to mark the places which held his attention. Of course these indices are not exhaustive, for they were intended for his own personal reference. But they are very valuable in indicating the exact passages in his

¹ *Ibid.*, VII., 409.

² *Ibid.*, VII., 211.



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sources in which he found his "lustres." Along with the marginal markings they show how curious his reading was, for they lead one into footnotes, introductions, and appendices, from all of which he gathered material for some of his most distinctive work. An examination of the marked passages alone would indicate a lively interest on his part in the matters they discuss, but when they are studied in the light of his critical attitude toward Platonism they appear as veritable sources of his thought.

Emerson is specific, too, in explaining the peculiar influence which the Platonists exerted upon him. They were an intellectual tonic. At the close of his essay, *Intellect*, he pays the following tribute to these writers: "I cannot recite, even thus rudely, laws of the intellect, without remembering that lofty and sequestered class who have been its prophets and oracles, the high-priesthood of the pure reason, the *Trismegisti*, the expounders of the principles of thought from age to age. When at long intervals we turn over these abstruse pages, wonderful seems the calm and grand air of these few, these great spiritual lords who have walked in the world—these of the old religion—dwelling in a worship which makes

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the sanctities of Christianity look *parvenues* and popular; for 'persuasion is in soul, but necessity is in intellect.' This band of grandees, Hermes, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, Plotinus, Olympiodorus, Proclus, Synesius and the rest, have somewhat so vast in their logic, so primary in their thinking, that it seems antecedent to all the ordinary distinctions of rhetoric and literature, and to be at once poetry and music and dancing and astronomy and mathematics. I am present at the sowing of the seed of the world. With a geometry of sunbeams the soul lays the foundations of nature. The truth and grandeur of their thought is proved by its scope and applicability, for it commands the entire schedule and inventory of things for its illustration."¹

Emerson also found a stimulant to the imagination in reading these writers. "The imaginative scholar," he writes in his essay, *Books*, "will find few stimulants to his brain like these writers. He has entered the Elysian Fields; and the grand and pleasing figures of gods and dæmons and dæmoniacal men, of the 'azonic' and the 'aquatic gods,' dæmons with fulgid eyes, and all the

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 345, 346.



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rest of the Platonic rhetoric, exalted a little under the African sun, sail before his eyes. The acolyte has mounted the tripod over the cave at Delphi; his heart dances, his sight is quickened. These guides speak of the gods with such depth and with such pictorial details, as if they had been bodily present at the Olympian feasts. The reader of these books makes new acquaintance with his own mind; new regions of thought are opened.”¹

Plato does not seem to have dazzled Emerson in the way in which his brilliant friends, the Neo-Platonists did. “Plato is a gownsmen,” he writes; “his garment, though of purple, and almost sky-woven, is an academic robe and hinders action with its voluminous folds.”² Again he says of Plato, “He never writes in ecstasy, or catches us up into poetic raptures.”³ And yet the reading of Plato was at times a most solemn event in Emerson’s life. He told one friend that it was a great day in a man’s life when he first read the *Symposium*.⁴ Again, he explains that “the scholar must look long for the right hour for

¹ *Ibid.*, VII., 203.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 123.

³ *Ibid.*, IV., 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV., 307.

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Plato's *Timæus*. At last the elect morning arrives, the early dawn—a few lights conspicuous in the heaven, as of a world just created and still becoming—and in its wide leisures we dare open that book.”¹ And to Carlyle he writes: “I had it fully in my heart to write at large leisure in noble mornings, opened by prayer, or by readings of Plato or whomsoever else is dearest to the Morning Muse.”² Plato, then, though not so dazzling a power over his mind and imagination as the Neo-Platonists, was still a great inspiration. The qualifying language which he uses in speaking of him is due to the fact that as contrasted with the Platonists, Plato lacks the ecstasy in which Neo-Platonism as a system of mysticism lives and moves and has its being.

More evidence of like nature to that already adduced can be found in Emerson's utterances but sufficient has been given to justify the belief in the importance of Platonism as a molding power in Emerson's thinking. By approaching his work and his Platonic sources in the spirit in which he himself came to the task one is able to come to a fair notion

¹ *Ibid.*, VII., 169-170.

² *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson*, II., 2.



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of his indebtedness to Plato and his school. And although one can not reconstruct a coordinated scheme of Platonism from Emerson's work, one need not accept the view of Cabot, his biographer and friend, who writes: "In general, to look for the source of any way of thinking of his in the Neo-Platonists, or in any of the books he read, seems to me like tracing the origin of Jacob Behmen's illumination to the glitter of the pewter tankard which, he says, awakened in him the consciousness of divine things."¹ The golden way lies somewhere between this negation and the other; only on a careful analysis of his work will the way be revealed.

¹*A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I., 291.



CHAPTER II

NATURE

THE dualism in which the speculation of the Platonists culminates underlies Emerson's conception of the constitution of things. "What the world ends in, therefore," writes Plotinus, "is matter and reason, but that from which it arose, and by which it is governed, is soul."¹ In similar strain Emerson opens his exposition of the nature of the universe with the statement that "philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul."² These two elements—nature and soul—are the poles of Emerson's thought as a philosopher concerned with the ultimate postulates of thinking. Nature was the first topic that engaged his attention, although his final word on the subject was not spoken until he had elaborated his conception of soul.

In his Platonic sources there was a wealth

¹ *Five Books of Plotinus*, 123.

² *Complete Works*, I., 4.

of speculation on nature. Plato himself had left in his *Timæus* an account of natural philosophy of which the portion dealing with the conception of matter, or space, became of prime importance to Plotinus in his speculation on the same subject. In the third selection from Plotinus' *Enneads* contained in Taylor's translation of the *Select Works*, Emerson found a full outline of the position of Plotinus on this great topic. Proclus, too, had reviewed the subject as it was handled by the chief Greek thinkers and the passage containing his account Emerson had indexed under "Nature" in his own copy of *The Commentaries of Proclus on the Timæus of Plato*.¹ Plutarch had embodied a mass of opinion on nature in his *Morals*.² Emerson did not esteem the bulk of these opinions very highly; he thought them very crude; many of them puerile. But, he fails not to add, "Usually, when Thales, Anaximenes or Anaximander are quoted, it is really a good judgment."³ In Ocellus Lucanus, Emerson had a short treatise on the nature of the universe. And finally in Cudworth he found a

¹ I., 8-10.

² *Morals*, III., 104-193.

³ *Complete Works*, X., 310.

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*Digression Concerning the Plastic Life of Nature, or an Artificial, Orderly and Methodical Nature.*¹

From this *Digression* Emerson extracted a quotation from Plotinus which he used as a motto for the first edition of *Nature*. "Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; Nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know."² The original extract from Cudworth which yielded Emerson his sentence reads: "How doth wisdom differ from that which is called nature? Verily in this manner, that wisdom is the first thing, but nature the last and lowest; for nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul, which hath the lowest impress of reason shining upon it; as when a thick piece of wax is thoroughly impressed upon by a seal, that impress, which is clean and distinct in the superior superficies of it, will in the lower side be weak and obscure; and such is the stamp and signature of nature, compared with that of wisdom and understanding, nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know."³ Later

¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 217-280.

² *Complete Works*, I., 403-404.

³ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 240.

editions of *Nature* appeared without this motto; but the firstling of Emerson's mind nevertheless testifies to its author's indebtedness to Platonism.

In the quotation from Plotinus is found the conception which characterizes one phase of Emerson's treatment of Nature. This phase is given in his theory of symbolism. Briefly put, the theory can be stated in three propositions: (1) "Words are signs of natural facts." (2) "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts." (3) "Nature is the symbol of Spirit."¹

Each of these statements summarizes a teaching of Platonism with which Emerson's reading had made him familiar. In his *Cratylus* Plato sets forth the notion of the philosophical import of words to the effect that they are imitations of real things; or as Socrates says, "names properly imposed are like the things, of which they are the names laid down, and are resemblances of the things."² Here is the source of Emerson's teaching of the symbolic nature of words.

The symbolism of things is a recognized tenet of the Platonists. Plutarch, especially,

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 25.

² Bohn translation, III., 391.

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is given to elucidating the symbolical meaning of myths, and in his essay, *Of Isis and Osiris*, busies himself in unfolding the philosophical import of the rites of the ancient Egyptians. In doing so he justifies himself by an appeal to the method of the Pythagoreans. "If, therefore," he urges, "the most approved of the philosophers did not think meet to pass over or disesteem any significant symbol of the Divinity which they observed even in things that had neither soul nor body, I believe they regarded yet more those properties of government and conduct which they saw in such natures as had sense, and were endued with soul, with passion, and with moral temper. We are not, therefore, to content ourselves with worshipping these things, but we must worship God through them—as being the more clear mirrors of him, and produced by Nature—so as ever worthily to conceive of them as instruments or artifices of that God which orders all things." ¹

So, too, do Emerson and the Platonists agree in the most universal form of statement—namely, that nature is the symbol of spirit. In the *Timæus* of Plato the Creator is repre-

¹ *Morals*, IV., 134.

sented as fabricating the world after an eternal, intelligible pattern of which this world becomes an image. "To discover, then, the *Creator* and *Father* of this universe," says the *Timæus*, "as well as his work, is indeed difficult; and when discovered, it is impossible to reveal him to mankind at large. And this, too, we must consider respecting him, according to which of two patterns he modelled the world; whether with reference to one subsisting ever in a state of sameness and similarly affected, or with reference to one that is only generated. If this world then is beautiful and its artificer good, he evidently looked to an eternal pattern, but if it be without beauty, and what it is not lawful to mention, he must have looked to one that is generated. It is evident, however, to everyone that he looked to one that was eternal; for the universe is the most beautiful of generated things, and its artificer the best of causes. Being thus generated, then, it has been framed according to principles that can be comprehended by reason and reflection, and ever abides in sameness of being."¹ Stated in the language of Emerson this idea

¹ Bohn translation, II., 332-333.

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underlies the third proposition of his symbolical teaching, namely, that nature is a symbol of spirit.

Thus far the universe has been viewed as it is seen manifested in space, or in its material phase; but Plato's speculation attended to it as it appears under the aspect of time. And just as the substance of the world has a spiritual counterpart, so the world in time is related to a spiritual reality, called eternity. Thus Plato speaks of the world: "When the parent Creator perceived that this created image of the eternal gods had life and motion, he was delighted with his work, and by this very delight he was led to consider how he might make it still more to resemble its exemplar. Hence, as the *intelligible* universe was an eternal animal, he tried to make this [the *sensible* universe], as far as he could, similarly perfect. The nature indeed of the animal itself was eternal, and this nature could not be entirely adopted into anything subject to generation; hence God resolved to form a certain movable image of eternity; and thus, while he was disposing the parts of the universe, he, out of that eternity which rests in unity, formed an eternal image on the

principle of numbers; and to this we give the appellation of *Time*.”¹

This conception of time as the image of eternity Emerson lays down as the fundamental one in his *Lecture on the Times*. “The Times, as we say—or the present aspects of our social state, the Laws, Divinity, Natural Science, Agriculture, Art, Trade, Letters, have their root in an invisible spiritual reality. To appear in these aspects, they must first exist, or have some necessary foundation. Beside all the small reasons we assign, there is a great reason for the existence of every extant fact; a reason which lies grand and immovable, often unsuspected, behind it in silence. The Times are the masquerade of the Eternities; trivial to the dull, tokens of noble and majestic agents to the wise; the receptacle in which the Past leaves its history; the quarry out of which the genius of to-day is building up the Future.”²

Symbolism is an attempt to express the spiritual meaning of the world, to see in it a reflection of spiritual reality. It is a theory that appeals to the feeling for art, since the

¹ *The Timæus*, Bohn translation, II., 340-341.

² *Complete Works*, I., 259.



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world of things according to its teaching becomes an imitation of a spiritual world of pure intelligence. In Emerson's hands the theory assumes a literary value; and thus the end which nature serves when viewed symbolically is called by him language. The final use which he makes of the theory does not appear in his *Nature*; there the theory is merely a stage through which he passes in his interpretation of the meaning of the universe. Later the same theory will reappear in his conception of art.

A second theory of the meaning of nature is based upon the relation of the world of matter to the world of mind. This relation underlies symbolism; but in the new statement which Emerson makes the terms are changed. Nature is conceived as an orderly system of laws executing themselves and mind is viewed as an invisible world in which ideas are the final realities. By correlating these two terms, the laws of nature and the ideas of the mind, Emerson gets his new theory. "The uneasiness which the thought of our helplessness in the chain of causes occasions us," he writes, "results from looking too much at one condition of nature, namely, Motion. But the drag is never taken from the wheel.

Wherever the impulse exceeds, the Rest or Identity insinuates its compensation. All over the wide fields of earth grows the prunella or self-heal. After every foolish day we sleep off the fumes and furies of its hours; and though we are always engaged with particulars, and often enslaved to them, we bring with us to every experiment the innate universal laws. These, while they exist in the mind as ideas, stand around us in nature forever embodied, a present sanity to expose and cure the insanity of men." ¹ That is, laws of nature are correlative to ideas of mind.

In such a theory the doctrine of ideas as set forth in Plato is apparent; but the form which the theory takes in Emerson is due to Coleridge's reworking of Plato's theory. Emerson himself has left a passage which proves this connection with Plato through Coleridge. "But the philosopher, not less than the poet," he explains in *Nature*, "postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought. 'The problem of philosophy,' according to Plato, 'is, for all that exists conditionally, to find a ground unconditioned and absolute.' It proceeds on the faith that a law determines all

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 194-195.

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phenomena, which being known, the phenomena can be predicted. That law, when in the mind, is an idea.¹

The source of this quotation is found in Coleridge's *Friend*, where the theory of correlation was fully stated for Emerson: "The grand problem, the solution of which forms, according to Plato, the final object and distinctive character of philosophy, is this: for all that exists conditionally (that is, the existence of which is inconceivable except under the condition of its dependency on some other as its antecedent) to find a ground that is unconditional and absolute, and thereby to reduce the aggregate of human knowledge to a system. For the relation common to all being known, the appropriate orbit of each becomes discoverable, together with its peculiar relations to its concentrics in the common sphere of subordination. Thus the centrality of the sun having been established, and the law of the distances of the planets from the sun having been determined, we possess the means of calculating the distance of each from the other. But as all objects of sense are in continual flux, and as the notices of them by the senses must, as far as they are true notices,

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 55.

change with them, while scientific principles or laws are no otherwise principles of science than as they are permanent and always the same, the latter were appropriated to the pure reason, either as its products or as implanted in it. And now the remarkable fact forces itself on our attention, namely, that the material world is found to obey the same laws as had been deduced independently from the reason; and that the masses act by a force which can not be conceived to result from the component parts, known or imaginable. In magnetism, electricity, galvanism, and in chemistry generally, the mind is led instinctively, as it were, to regard the working powers as conducted, transmitted, or accumulated by the sensible bodies, and not as inherent. This fact has, at all times, been the stronghold alike of the materialists and of the spiritualists, equally solvable by the two contrary hypotheses, and fairly solved by neither. In the clear and masterly review of the elder philosophers, which must be ranked among the most splendid proofs of his judgment no less than of his genius, and more expressly in the critique on the atomic or corpuscular doctrine of Democritus and his followers as the one extreme, and in that of the pure rational-

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ism of Zeno the Eleatic as the other, Plato has proved incontrovertibly that in both alike the basis is too narrow to support the superstructure; that the grounds of both are false or disputable; and that if these were conceded, yet neither the one nor the other scheme is adequate to the solution of the problem—namely, what is the ground of the coincidence between reason and experience; or between the laws of matter and the ideas of the pure intellect. The only answer which Plato deemed the question capable of receiving, compels the reason to pass out of itself and seek the ground of this agreement in a supersensual essence, which being at once the ideal of the reason and the cause of the material world, is the pre-establisher of the harmony in and between both."¹

To make his statement clearer Coleridge adds in a note: "I now more especially entreat the reader's attention to the sense in which here, and everywhere through this essay, I use the word idea, I assert, that the very impulse to universalize any *phænomenon* involves the prior assumption of some efficient law in nature, which in a thousand different

¹ *The Friend. The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II., 420-422.

forms is evermore one and the same, entire in each, yet comprehending all, and incapable of being abstracted or generalized from any number of *phænomena*, because it is itself pre-supposed in each and all as their common ground and condition, and because every definition of a *genus* is the adequate definition of the lowest species alone, while the efficient law must contain the ground of all in all. It is attributed, never derived. The utmost we ever venture to say is, that the falling of an apple suggested the law of gravitation to Sir I. Newton. Now a law and an idea are correlative terms, and differ only as object and subject, as being and truth.”¹

This is the manner in which Emerson considers the question of nature. First in importance of the influences upon the mind of the scholar is that of nature; and this influence, Emerson goes on to explain, leads the scholar to settle upon the value of nature to him, which is revealed only when he begins to study her meaning. “Classification begins,” Emerson says. “To the young mind every thing is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things

¹ *The Friend. The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II., 424.

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and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand, and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem. . . . But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind?"¹

Such correlation of nature and mind is everywhere present in Emerson's work: it is one of his fixed ideas. As a moralist he sees in the theory a proof of the essentially ethical character of all natural law. On this he insists. "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass. 'The visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible.' The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics. Thus 'the whole is greater than its part;' 'reaction is equal to action;' 'the smallest weight may be made to lift the greatest, the difference of weight be-

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 85-86.

ing compensated by time;’ and many the like propositions, which have an ethical as well as physical sense. These propositions have a much more extensive and universal sense when applied to human life, than when confined to technical use.”¹

This ethical interpretation of natural laws is a favorite exercise with Emerson. The specific instances of the correlation of mind and matter he calls “by-laws of the mind.”² As example he dwells on the correspondence of gravity to truth. “The first quality we know in matter,” he writes in explanation of the equivalence of the soul to nature, “is centrality—we call it gravity—which holds the universe together, which remains pure and indestructible in each mote as in masses and planets, and from each atom rays out illimitable influence. To this material essence answers Truth, in the intellectual world—Truth, whose center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere, whose existence we cannot disimagine; the soundness and health of things, against which no blow can be struck but it recoils on the striker; Truth, on whose side we always heartily are. And the first

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 32-33.

² *Ibid.*, XII., 15.

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measure of a mind is its centrality, its capacity of truth, and its adhesion to it.”¹

Other instances of analogies between the natural and the moral worlds are to be found in his paralleling diamagnetism, or cross magnetism, of gases with a law of personality which he calls bias.² The chemical rule—*corpora non agunt nisi soluta*—he says holds true in mind.³ In fact, a long series of such analogies drawn from the laws of physics and vegetation constitutes a considerable part of what Emerson loves to call the Natural History of Intellect.⁴

The suggestion to gather such by-laws of the mind arose in Emerson's mind as a result of his reading in Bacon. Coleridge had placed Bacon side by side with Plato and had pointed out the relation of his natural philosophy to Plato's system of ideas. Whether or not first directed to Bacon by Coleridge, Emerson certainly used Bacon in accordance with Coleridge's theory of correlation and came to associate Bacon's philosophy with that of Plato.

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 221.

² *Ibid.*, VIII., 306.

³ *Ibid.*, XI., 533.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XII., 23 et sq.

In his review of Bacon's work Emerson notes that Bacon "explained himself by giving various quaint examples of the summary or common laws of which each science has its own illustration."¹ This is a reference to a passage in the *Advancement of Learning* which Bacon cites in his explanation of the province of a First Philosophy. This philosophy Bacon says is to be "a receptacle for all such profitable observations and axioms as fall not within the compass of any of the special parts of philosophy or sciences, but are more common and of a higher stage."²

As instances of such observations and axioms he gives the following: "For example; is not the rule 'Si inæqualibus æqualia addas, omnia erunt inæqualia,' an axiom as well of justice as of mathematics? And is there not a true coincidence between commutative and distributive justice, and arithmetical and geometrical proportion? Is not that other rule, 'Quæ in eodem tertio conveniunt, et inter se conveniunt,' a rule taken from the mathematics, but so potent in logic as all syllogisms are built upon it? Is not the observation, 'Omnia mutantur, nil interit,' a contempla-

¹ *Ibid.*, V., 240.

² *The Works of Francis Bacon*, II., 126.



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tion, in philosophy thus, that the quantum of nature is eternal? in natural theology thus, that it requireth the same omnipotence to make somewhat nothing, which at the first made nothing somewhat? according to the Scripture, 'Didici quod omnia opera, quæ fecit Deus, perseverunt in perpetuum; non possumus eis quicquam addere nec auferre.' Is not the ground, which Machiavel wisely and largely discourseth concerning governments, that the way to establish and preserve them is to reduce them 'ad principia,' a rule in religion and nature, as well as in civil administration? Was not the Persian magic a reduction or correspondence of the principles and architectures of nature to the rules and policy of government? Is not the precept of a musician, to fall from a discord or harsh accord upon a concord or sweet accord, alike true in affection? Is not the trope of music, to avoid or slide from the close or cadence, common with the trope of rhetoric of deceiving expectation? Is not the delight of the quavering upon a stop in music the same with the playing of light upon the water?

'Splendet tremulo sub lumine pontus:'

Are not the organs of the senses of one kind with the organs of reflection, the eye with a glass, the ear with a cave or strait determined and bounded? Neither are those only similitudes, as men of narrow observation may conceive them to be, but the same footsteps of nature, treading or printing upon several subjects or matters. This science, therefore, as I understand it, I may justly report as deficient; for I see sometimes the profounder sort of wits, in handling some particular argument, will now and then draw a bucket of water out of this well for their present use; but the spring head thereof seemeth to me not to have been visited; being of so excellent use, both for the disclosing of nature, and the abridgement of art.”¹

Emerson's by-laws of the mind are not so quaint, to use his own expression, as Bacon's, but they are open imitations of Bacon's manner. They show how fruitful Coleridge's correlation of the Platonic and Baconian philosophy was in suggesting to Emerson the practice of seeking the ethical meaning of the laws of nature. Emerson had no love of science in and for itself, but in the results of

¹ *The Works of Francis Bacon*, II., 126-128.

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science he found much to satisfy his spiritual needs when those results could be seen to have significance for morals.

This means that Emerson held consistently to the sovereignty of ethics, by which he meant the supremacy of the moral or intellectual world over the world of outward nature. Speaking of the laws of the natural world as perpetual forces, he says: "These forces are in an ascending series, but seem to leave no room for the individual; man or atom, he only shares them; he sails the way these irresistible winds blow. But behind all these finer elements, the sources of them, and much more rapid and strong; a new style and series, the spiritual. Intellect and morals appear only the material forces on a higher plane. The laws of material nature run up into the invisible world of the mind, and hereby we acquire a key to those sublimities which skulk and hide in the caverns of human consciousness. And in the impenetrable mystery which hides—and hides through absolute transparency—the mental nature, I await the insight which our advancing knowledge of material laws shall furnish."¹

By reason of Coleridge's correlation Em-

¹ *Complete Works*, X., 72.

erson was able to speak of laws in the same manner as Plato treats ideas. These ideas of Plato's are the sole realities and they are known only by the intellect. They are grouped together in the intelligible world and, though they seem independent, there is one idea supreme among them. This is the idea of the Good. It is the chief end of all man's endeavors; the final satisfaction for which he strives. It is also the cause of existence to all things and of all knowledge that man can know. It is also the principle of unity both in the world of objective things and in the conscious life of intellect in man. Using the analogy of the sun in the visible world, Plato thus explains his conception: "That therefore which imparts truth to what is known, and dispenses the faculty of knowledge to him who knows, you may call the idea of *the good* and the principle of science and truth, as being known through intellect. And as both these—knowledge and truth—are so beautiful, you will be right in thinking that the good is something different, and still more beautiful than these. Science and truth here are as light and sight there, which we rightly judged to be sun-like, but yet did not think them to be the sun: so here it is right

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to hold that both of them partake of the form of *the good*, but yet not right to suppose that either of them is *the good*—inasmuch as *the good itself* is worthy of still greater honour. . . . You will say, I think, that the sun imparts to things which are seen, not only their visibility, but likewise their generation, growth and nourishment, though not itself generation? Of course. We may say, therefore, as to things cognizable by the intellect, that they became cognizable not only from *the good*, by which they are known, but likewise that their being and essence are thence derived, while *the good* itself is not essence, but beyond essence, and superior to it both in dignity and power.”¹

Parallel to this conception is Emerson's idea of the universe. He believes in the reality of an intelligible world, but it is a world of laws. And just as Plato had found the idea of the good giving unity to the ideas in the intelligible world, so Emerson finds universal good saturating all the laws of the universe and binding them into unity. “I find the survey of the cosmical powers a doctrine of consolation in the dark hours of private or public fortune. It shows us the

¹ *The Republic*, Bohn translation, II., 108-109.

world alive, guided, incorruptible; that its cannon cannot be stolen nor its virtues misapplied. It shows us the long Providence, the safeguards of rectitude. It animates exertion. . . . This world belongs to the energetical. It is a fagot of laws, and a true analysis of these laws, showing how immortal and how self-protecting they are, would be a wholesome lesson for every time and for this time. That band which ties them together is unity, is universal good, saturating all with one being and aim, so that each translates the other, is only the same spirit applied to new departments. Things are saturated with the moral law.”¹

“It is essential to a true theory of nature and of man,” says Emerson, “that it should contain somewhat progressive.”² Holding to such a conception he was not at rest in stating the problem of nature until he had examined her method. Symbolism and correlation are theories that account for the meaning of nature: they tell what she is; but they do not let one into the secret of the life which gives nature her method. Therefore Emerson passes on to consider what this method of nature is; and

¹ *Complete Works*, X., 85-86.

² *Ibid.*, I., 61.

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he still finds in Platonism the suggestions for all his teachings on this new topic.

At the basis of his thinking on the method of nature lies the doctrine of flux. This is an inheritance of Plato and the Platonists from the early philosophy of Heraclitus. As Socrates remarks in the *Cratylus*, "Heraclitus says somewhere that all things move, and nothing is at rest; and comparing things to the flowing of a river, observes that 'Thou canst not twice into the same stream go.'"¹ Or, as Plotinus quotes Heraclitus, "bodies are always rising into existence, or becoming to be, and flowing."² This idea of flux Plato, and after him the Platonists, incorporated into their theory of the sensible world. In the *Timæus* the idea finds its fullest statement. "In the first place, then, what we now denominate water, on becoming condensed, seems to take the form of stones and earth,—and when melted and dispersed, that of vapour and air; air also when burnt up, becomes fire, while the latter again, on becoming condensed and extinct, resumes the form of air; and again air, when collected and condensed, produces

¹ *The Works of Plato*, Bohn translation, III., 318.

² *Select Works of Plotinus*, 276.

mists and clouds, from which, when still more compressed, rain descends; and from water again are formed earth and stones; the whole of them, as it seems, exchanging all round their mutual generation.

“As these, then, never maintain any constancy of existence, who will have the assurance to maintain that any one of them is *this* rather than *that*? No one, and it would be far the safest plan to speak about them as follows: When we see anything constantly passing from one state of existence to another, as fire for instance, we should not say that it is fire absolutely, but something fiery—and again, that what we call water is not absolutely so, but something watery; without assigning to them any names that would give the idea of stability, as we think people do, when they express it by *this* and *that*; for not being of an abiding nature, it cannot endure to have applied to it such terms as, *this thing, of this nature, belonging to this*; and any such others as would show it to have a substantive existence. Hence we should not give anyone of them an individual name, but call it something such-like, but ever fluctuating; and especially with respect to fire, we should assert

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that it is wholly such-like, and similarly likewise, everything endued with generation.”¹

Emerson reflects this conception of the flux of things in his view of the eternal cycle of change manifested in the universe. “All things are flowing,” he writes, “even those that seem immovable. The adamant is always passing into smoke. The plants imbibe the materials which they want from the air and the ground. They burn, that is, exhale and decompose their own bodies into the air and earth again. The animal burns, or undergoes the like perpetual consumption. The earth burns, the mountains burn and decompose, slower, but incessantly. It is almost inevitable to push the generalization up into higher parts of Nature, rank over rank into sentient beings. Nations burn with eternal fire of thought and affection, which wastes while it works. We shall find finer combustion and finer fuel. Intellect is a fire: rash and pitiless it melts this wonderful bone-house which is called man.”²

In this flux of things the constant substance is law. “Thin or solid, everything is in flight. I believe this conviction makes the charm of

¹ *The Works of Plato*, Bohn translation, II., 355-356.

² *Complete Works*, VII., 145.

chemistry—that we have the same avoirdupois matter in an alembic, without a vestige of the old form; and in animal transformation not less, as in grub and fly, in egg and bird, in embryo and man; everything undressing and stealing away from its old into new form, and nothing fast but those invisible cords which we call laws, on which all is strung. Then we see that things wear different names and faces, but belong to one family; that the secret cords or laws show their well-known virtue through every variety, be it animal, or plant, or planet, and the interest is gradually transferred from the forms to the lurking method.”¹

Such a view corresponds to Plato’s reasoning from the instability of the flux of sensible things to the necessary existence of the idea, “which subsists according to sameness, unproduced and not subject to decay; receiving nothing into itself from elsewhere, and itself never entering into any other nature, but invisible and imperceptible by the senses, and to be apprehended only by pure intellect.”² The only variation to be noted is that Emerson makes law the permanent substance amid

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 5.

² *The Timæus*, Bohn translation, II., 358.

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all change. But this had been made in accordance with Coleridge's statement of the relation of the science of natural history to the science of intellect; they are correlative sciences and law which is the object of inquiry in the one is a correlative of idea, or the end of inquiry, in the other. By adopting this theory Emerson was able to restate the doctrine of flux in order to show that law is the only fixed thing we know in nature.

But Emerson has another way of handling the idea of flux. Plotinus had used the doctrine to testify to the unreality of the world of sensible things as opposed to the reality of soul. Emerson follows him, as well as Plato; in fact, in his treatment of flux Emerson is more frequently following the ideas of Plotinus than of the older philosopher. For in Emerson the idea of flux is often associated with spirit or mind. Nature, he holds, is "always the effect, mind the flowing cause."¹ "Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it."² His treatment, then, leads to a discussion of the spiritual life of the universe which flows

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 223.

² *Ibid.*, I., 76.

through all things, animate and inanimate.
The idea of flux is thus spiritualized.

The simplest form his idea takes is given
in his *Two Rivers*, in which he sets forth life
as a flux.

“Thy summer voice, Musketaquit,
Repeats the music of the rain;
But sweeter rivers pulsing flit
Through thee, as thou through Concord Plain.

“Thou in thy narrow banks are pent;
The stream I love unbounded goes
Through flood and sea and firmament,
Through light, through life, it forward flows.

“I see the inundations sweet,
I hear the spending of the stream
Through years, through men, through Nature fleet,
Through love and thought, through power and
dream.

“Musketaquit, a goblin strong,
Of shard and flint makes jewels gay;
They lose their grief who hear his song,
And where he winds is the day of day.



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“So forth and brighter fares my stream—
Who drink it shall not thirst again;
No darkness stains its equal gleam,
And ages drop in it like rain.”¹

In setting forth this idea of flux in more detail Emerson draws upon the doctrine of emanation as it was explained by Plotinus. Thus the flux of natural things becomes an emanation from a divine source. “The method of nature,” he writes; “who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. The bird hastens to lay her egg; the egg hastens to be a bird. The wholeness we admire in the order of the world is the result of infinite distribution. Its smoothness is the smoothness of the pitch of the cataract. Its permanence is a perpetual inchoation. Every natural fact is an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation. If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed;

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 248.

as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought and do not flow with the course of nature. Not the cause, but an ever-novel effect, nature descends always from above. It is unbroken obedience. The beauty of these fair objects is imported into them from a metaphysical and eternal spring. In all animal and vegetable forms, the physiologist concedes that no chemistry, no mechanics, can account for the facts, but a mysterious principle of life must be assumed, which not only inhabits the organ but makes the organ.”¹

Such an interpretation of the method of nature is a result of Emerson's reworking of the emanation theory of Plotinus in keeping with the primary notion of the flux of things. Instead of a ceaseless flux on a low plain of absolutely meaningless change, which the simple doctrine of flux amounts to, there is an endless flowing of things out of an eternal and metaphysical spring which is the divine source of all the fluxions. The latter conception finds its source in Plotinus' account of the emanation of things from the one absolute principle. "What, then," he writes of this principle, "shall we say he is? The power of all things, without whose subsistence the

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 199-200.

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universality of things would never have had a being; nor would intellect have been, which is the first and universal life; for that which subsists above life is the cause of life, since the energy of life which is all things, is not the first, but emanates this principle as its ineffable fountain. Conceive then a fountain possessing no other principle, but imparting itself to all rivers, without being exhausted by any one of them, and abiding quietly in itself; but the streams which emanate from this fountain, before they flow in different directions, as yet abiding together, and, as it were, already knowing what rivulets will proceed from their defluxions.”¹

According to another way of viewing the subject the method of nature is identified with the manifestation of the divine Presence rushing through the world in eternal progress. In such a conception the theory of evolution is felt but ancient philosophy still more. In Cudworth Emerson had noted an explanation of the universe conceived in the manner of the Platonists as τὸ πᾶν, or God. “τὸ πᾶν, or ‘the universe,’” says Cudworth, “was frequently taken by the pagan theologers also, as we have already intimated, in a more com-

¹ *Five Books of Plotinus*, 237.

prehensive sense, for the Deity, together with all the extent of its fecundity, God as displaying himself in the world; or, for God and the world both together; the latter being looked upon as nothing but an emanation or efflux from the former . . . And according to this sense was the god Pan understood both by the Arcadians and the other Greeks, not for the mere corporeal world as senseless and inanimate, nor as endued with a plastic nature only (though this was partly included in the notion of Pan also), but as proceeding from a rational and intellectual principle, diffusing itself through all; or for the whole system of things, God and the world together, as one deity.”¹

With this idea in mind Emerson has his pine tree sing of the method of nature:

“Harken once more!
I will tell thee the mundane lore.
Older am I than thy numbers wot,
Change I may, but I pass not.
Hitherto all things fast abide,
And anchored in the tempest ride.
Trenchant time behooves to hurry
All to yeon and all to bury:

¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 582.

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All the forms are fugitive,
But the substances survive.
Ever fresh the broad creation,
A divine improvisation,
From the heart of god proceeds,
A single will, a million deeds.
Once slept the world an egg of stone,
And pulse, and sound, and light was none;
And God said, "Throb!" and then was motion
And the vast mass became vast ocean.
Onward and on, the eternal Pan,
Who layeth the world's incessant plan,
Halteth never in one shape,
But forever doth escape,
Like wave or flame, into new forms
Of gems, and air, of plants, and worms.

As the bee through the garden ranges,
From world to world the godhead changes;
As sheep go feeding in the waste,
From form to form He maketh haste;
This vault which glows immense with light
Is the inn where he lodges for a night.'"¹

Finally, Emerson considers the flux of nature as an indication of unfolding consciousness of life. "If we look at her work," he writes of nature, "we seem to catch a glance

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 57-59.

of a system in transition. Plants are the young of the world, vessels of health and vigor; but they grope ever upward towards consciousness; the trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground. The animal is the novice and probationer of a more advanced order. The men, though young, having tasted the first drop from the cup of thought, are already dissipated: the maples and ferns are still uncorrupt; yet no doubt when they come to consciousness they too will curse and swear.”¹

In thus explaining the method of nature Emerson was using a doctrine of Plotinus which taught the conscious life of contemplative activity in all things, even inanimate. “If previous to a serious inquiry into nature,” he writes, “we should jocosely, as it were, affirm that all things desire contemplation, and verge to this as their end, not only rational animals but those destitute of reason, the nature of plants, and earth, the mother of them all; likewise that all things pursue contemplation, as far as the natural capacity of each permits, but that some things contemplate and pursue contemplation differently from others,

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 181-182.

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some in reality and some by imitation beholding only the image; if we should affirm all this, shall we not appear to advance a doctrine entirely new?"¹

The method of nature in Emerson is thus one that grows out of a belief in the spiritual life of the universe. This life is set forth under the figure of a stream. So Heraclitus had conceived it and had passed the idea down through Plato to the Platonists. In Emerson it is the characteristic image under which he views the life of the universe. But he is careful to spiritualize the idea of a flux and to identify it with the ceaseless energy of the divine method in nature. Drawing upon the tenets of Platonism he presents this energy operating over and above things while seated in its divine source, or as immanent in nature as a rushing power of onward progress, or finally, as an unfolding consciousness of life. These are views of nature that identify her with spirit and as will appear later, it is into this that Emerson finally resolves the world of outward things.

Universal antagonism is another idea under which Emerson views the life or method of

¹ *Five Books of Plotinus*, 199-200. Cf. *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I., 404.

nature. At times he considers the world a bifold fact made up of "metaphysical antagonists"¹ and names the dualism Undulation or Polarity.² "Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature," he explains; "in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity. Superinduce magnetism at one end of a needle, the opposite magnetism takes place at the other end. If the south attracts, the north repels. To empty here, you must condense there. An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay."³

This is a development of the Pythagorean

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 299.

² *Ibid.*, I., 98; II., 96.

³ *Ibid.*, II., 96-97.

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notion which forms one phase of Emerson's Platonism. In De Gérando's *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie* Emerson found an account of the celebrated decade attributed to Alcmaëon, which gives a list of couples constituting the universe. It groups the elements of the world into:

“Le fini, περας, l'infini, απειρον,
L'impair, περιττον, le pair, αρτιον,
L'un, εν, le multiple, πληθος,
Le droit, δεξιον, le gauche, αριστερον,
Le mâle, αρρεν, le féminin, θηλυ,
L'objet en repos, ηρεμων, en mouveuu, κινουμενον,
Le direct, ευθυ, le courbe, καμπυλον,
La lumière, φως, les ténèbres, σκοτος,
Le bon, αγαθον, le mauvais, κακον,
Le carré, τετραγωνον, le quadrilatère irregulier,
ετερομηκες.”¹

In Emerson's series three of the original list of Alcmaëon appear; darkness and light, male and female; rest and motion. The additions are his own and could be indefinitely extended, for the original scheme is arbitrary. It forms, however, the basis of all Emerson's thinking on this phase of nature. It is not as profoundly treated as the foregoing statement

¹ I., 409.

of nature's method; it is a theory that moves on the surface of things and lacks deep insight into the inward life of nature. As applied to the world of morals it forms the ground of Emerson's law of compensation; but even when thus used, it yields to a higher idea grounded in a truer conception of the soul's life.

Thus far nature has been viewed in its totality; but Emerson's philosophy attends to each particle of the mass and finds it representative of the whole. He holds to "the fact that the universe is represented in every one of its particles. Everything in nature contains all the powers of nature. Everything is made of one hidden stuff; as the naturalist sees one type under every metamorphosis, and regards a horse as a running man, a fish as a swimming man, a bird as a flying man, a tree as a rooted man. Each new form repeats not only the main character of the type, but part for part all the details, all the aims, furtherances, hindrances, energies and whole system of every other. Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and a correlation of every other. Each is an entire emblem of human life; of its good and ill, its trials, its enemies, its course and its end. And

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each one must somehow accommodate the whole man and recite all his destiny.”¹

This is the doctrine of the microcosm as treated in the Platonists. In his *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* Proclus writes: “Man indeed is considered prior to all things, either because the theory respecting him pertains to us who make him the subject of discussion, and are ourselves men; or because man is a microcosm, and all things subsist in him partially, as the world contains divinely and totally.”² And in his *On the Theology of Plato* he applies the idea to each particle in the universe. “For if man is said to be a microcosm, is it not necessary that each of the elements by a much greater priority should contain in itself appropriately all that the world contains totally?”³

Out of this conception arises Emerson’s teaching of the fundamental unity in nature. “Herein is especially apprehended the unity of Nature—the unity in variety—which meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things make an identical impression. Xenophanes complained in his old age, that, look

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 101.

² I., 4.

³ II., 193.

where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. He was weary of seeing the same entity in the tedious variety of forms. The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth. A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world." ¹ The same idea he expresses in his poem, *Xenophanes*.

In thus insisting on the unity of things Emerson, as his reference shows, was using a fragment of ancient Hellenic thought with which he was familiar. He got his knowledge of Xenophanes in De Gérando, who says: "Il [Xenophane] se plaignait que, dans les derniers temps de sa vie, il ne pouvait se féliciter de rien savoir avec certitude: 'quelque part qu'il portât ses regards, tout se resolvait pour lui dans l'unite: il ne lui apparassait partout qu'une substance semblable à elle-même.'" ²

In the conception of the unity of all things, so Emerson teaches, lies the possibility of restoring nature to its original and eternal beauty. As long as nature is studied in a nar-

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 43.

² *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie*, I., 460.

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rowly scientific spirit which attends primarily to naming of individual species, nature will never reveal her true meaning to the mind of man. Thus in his poem, *Blight*, he expresses his weariness of a surface knowledge of things and accuses the young scholars of a lack of love and therefore of the mystic knowledge of the flowers they pick. His mind refreshes itself in the thought of the old students of nature.

“The old men studied magic in the flowers,
And human fortunes in astronomy,
And an omnipotence in chemistry,
Preferring things to names, for these were men,
Were unitarians of the united world,
And, wheresoever their clear eye-beams fell,
They caught the footsteps of the Same.”¹

That is, the old men held to a conception of a unity of things which subsisted the same throughout all diversity. But we, he adds, are strangers to the stars, the beast, the bird, the mine, and the plant because we use them for selfish gain and do not ask their love.

“Therefore, to our sick eyes,
The stunted trees look sick, the summer short,

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 140.

Clouds shade the sun, which will not tan our hay,
And nothing thrives to reach its natural term.”¹

To bring back original beauty to the world thus blighted, the soul of man should cease from its disunited life and live in a divine unity. “The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other . . . When a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.”²

This enkindling of the intellect by love is the distinguishing characteristic of the spirit

¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

² *Ibid.*, I., 73-74.



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of inquiry in Plato. The true philosopher according to him is above all things a lover of truth. And this conception is carried over into the scheme of the Platonists, who make the highest end of all human knowledge the vision of the eternal unity of all things, the One. Thus Proclus explains that the mania, or the inspiration belonging to the lover, "receiving the soul united, conjoins this *one* of the soul to the gods, and to intelligible beauty."¹

That is, by living with a divine unity the soul realizes the highest possible experience. And this according to Emerson would mean the re-creation of the world. Hence in the closing section of *Nature*, "Prospects," he turns to the need of re-creating the world as the prospect that lies before each one after he has come to understand the meaning of nature and its relation to the mind of man. But at this point Emerson's thought passes over to a consideration of his second great theme, soul: and hence the final solution of the meaning of nature cannot be arrived at until this theme has been carefully explained.

¹ Quoted by Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 356.



CHAPTER III

SOUL

THROUGHOUT his treatment of nature Emerson relates his subject to soul. His themes of symbolism and correlation of mind and matter recognized the dependence of nature upon spirit or mind. His conception of the method of nature leads him to maintain the divine character of the energy which nature reveals in ceaseless operation in her realm. And his hope of the restoration of nature to her primary and eternal beauty is based upon his belief in the purification of the soul as the means to effect the change.

It was natural, then, as he was at work on his first book, *Nature*, that he should have contemplated the writing of another essay which he was to entitle *Spirit*. His plan as later developed did not, however, assign this new idea to a second essay but found a place for it in the original work. The seventh chapter of *Nature* is thus entitled "Spirit," the theme of which is indicated in its opening



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paragraph: "And all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit."¹ In Emerson's conception of spirit, then, is to be found his final teaching on the meaning of existence; in revealing the nature of soul all his deepest thinking ends.

His favorite authors were rich in schemes of speculation on this subject. Plato had placed the metaphysics of the soul on a commanding eminence in his *Phædo*, *Phædrus*, *Republic* and *Timæus*. Plotinus had left a group of *Enneads* that carried the speculations of Plato into the high realm of rational mysticism in which the soul of man is in actual contact with the soul of the highest principle of all things, the One; and in his theories of a universal Intellect and a Soul of the Universe he had given the form for all the speculation of the Platonists on the nature of soul. The attention which Emerson gave to such speculation even in its most mystical flights testifies to the closeness and the sympathy with which he read his Platonic sources.

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 61.

Soul in Emerson is an all-embracing term. It means God. It is also conceived as an intellectual energy, or pure intellect. And at times Emerson conceives it as the very life of the universe under the form of a world soul. Roughly speaking, his division corresponds to the three principles of the Platonists which are often spoken of as the Platonic trinity—the One, Universal Intellect, and Universal Soul. These three are conceived as the absolute hypostases of things and are all found in the soul of man. Emerson thus was able to dignify his conception of the human soul by relating it to these great principles. Of psychology in the scientific acceptance of the term in present-day philosophy Emerson has practically nothing to say; but of Soul as a divine presence in man and the universe he has left much in his most characteristic work.

Owing to his teachings on this subject he has come to be regarded as a seer and out of his central conception arises the great power which his writings generate in the lives of his readers. In order to show the importance of Platonism in his doctrine of the soul, then, it will be best to follow the threefold division of his idea: Soul as God, or the Over-Soul;



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Soul as Intellect; and Soul in the universe, or the World-Soul.

I.

THE OVER-SOUL.

The ground of all his teaching on soul is to be found in his doctrine of a Universal Mind, which is the sovereign agent common in its entirety to all men. "There is one mind," so his statement runs, "common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a part to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent."¹

In Cudworth is found a conception quite similar to this of Emerson's. To confute the theories of atheism Cudworth lays down the principle "that there can be but one only original mind, or no more than one understanding Being self-existent; all other minds whatsoever partaking of one original mind; and be-

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 3.

ing, as it were, stamped with the impression or signature of one and the same seal. From whence it cometh to pass, that all minds, in the several places and ages of the world, have ideas or notions of things exactly alike, and truths indivisibly the same. Truths are not multiplied by the diversity of minds that apprehend them; because they are all but ectypal participations of one and the same original or archetypal mind and truth. As the same face may be reflected in several glasses; and the image of the same sun may be in a thousand eyes at once beholding it; and one and the same voice may be in a thousand ears listening to it; so when innumerable created minds have the same ideas of things, and understand the same truths, it is but one and the same eternal light that is reflected in them all ("that light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world"), or the same voice of that one everlasting Word, that is never silent, re-echoed by them."¹

The conception of a universal mind goes back to the Neo-Platonic doctrine of one supreme intellect. In this mind all particular minds are contained, each expressing the whole in its own way. This supreme intellect

¹ *The True Intellectual Systems of the Universe*, III., 71.



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is one of the absolute principles. An account of the manner in which all minds exist in this one great mind is found in Plotinus. "They likewise see all things, not those with which generation, but those with which essence is present. And they perceive themselves in others. For all things there are diaphanous; and nothing is dark and resisting, but everything is apparent to every one internally and throughout. For light everywhere meets with light; since everything contains all things in itself, and again sees all things in another. So that all things are everywhere, and all is all. Each thing likewise is everything."¹

Emerson's account compared with Cudworth's and Plotinus' shows a characteristic manner of approach. Cudworth and Plotinus are concerned with the nature and existence of the supreme mind considered in and for itself, while Emerson views the question from the standpoint of the individual man who shares in this supreme mind as an inherited right. He thus emphasizes the individual's claim to such a mind.

But Emerson elaborates the idea in an even more characteristic fashion. In the statement of the doctrine as thus far made, the

¹ *Select Works*, Introduction, p. lxxx., note.

universal mind is described as merely present to each individual; no more specific account of the relation between the two is given. But in the name Over-Soul, which Emerson applies to the universal mind, there is a clear indication of a change in the relation between it and the individual; the universal soul presides over the former, gives it its life and directs its energies.

This advance in the idea recognizes the teaching of the Platonists concerning the inter-relation of their three great principles of all things. These principles are arranged in a causal series. At the head is the One, out of which proceeds logically Universal Mind or Intellect; and this latter in turn gives rise to Universal Soul. Each of the two principles below the One finds above it a greater principle out of which it comes and toward which its energies are directed. Proclus speaking of the relation of the third principle to the second says that "she [soul] sees above all souls, intellectual essences and orders. For above every soul a deiform intellect resides, which imparts to the soul an intellectual habit. She also sees prior to these, the monads of the gods themselves which are above intellect, and from which the intellec-

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tual multitudes receive their unions. For it is necessary that unific causes should be placed above things united, in the same manner as vivifying causes are above things vivified, causes that impart intellect are above things intellectualized, and in a similar manner unparticipable hypostases are above all participants.”¹

Plotinus, in like manner, describes the relation of soul to the world. “For it [soul] governs, abiding on high. And the world is animated after such a manner, that it cannot with so much propriety be said to have a soul of its own, as to have a soul presiding over it; being subdued by, and not subduing it, and being possessed, and not possessing. For it lies in soul which sustains it, and no part of it is destitute of soul; being moistened with life, like a net in water.”²

In such statements as these is to be found the suggestion of that theory of the Over-Soul which Emerson expounds in the following passage: “The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great

¹ Proclus, *On Providence and Fate*, in *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 455-456.

² *Select Works*, 343.

nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."¹

In this passage there is an accumulation of detail which shows how Emerson uses the various doctrines of Platonism to do honor to his great idea, the Over-Soul. He identifies it with "that Unity" and with "the eternal One," both of which expressions refer to the first of the absolute principles of the Platonists, the One. In stating that in the Over-Soul every man's particular being is contained

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 268-269.

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and made one with all other, he makes reference to the conception of the supreme intellect, in which, according to Plotinus, all minds subsist together. "And they perceive themselves in others," Plotinus writes. "For all things there are diaphanous; and nothing is dark and resisting, but everything is apparent to everyone internally and throughout. For light everywhere meets with light; since everything contains all things in itself, and again sees all things in another. So that all things are everywhere, and all is all. Each thing likewise is everything."¹

When he says that though we live in division, there is within us the soul of the whole, his words recall what Plotinus had written of the soul: "For it does not give life to individuals, through a division of itself into minute parts, but it vivifies all things with the whole of itself; and the whole of it is present everywhere, in a manner similar to its generator, both according to oneness and ubiquity."² In identifying the Over-Soul with the universal beauty, Emerson is referring to the absolute beauty which stands at the end of the dialectic quest in Plato's *Banquet* and

¹ *Select Works*, Introduction, p. lxxx., note.

² *Ibid.*, 258.

which Plotinus at times acknowledges to be the first principle of things, the beautiful itself.¹

Furthermore, in designating the Over-Soul "the wise silence," Emerson was but summing up what Plotinus teaches concerning the One and its knowledge of itself. "In the next place," adds Plotinus, "that which is entirely simple will not be in want of a busy energy, as it were, about itself. For what will it learn by intellectual perception? For prior to this perception, it exists that which it is to itself. For again, knowledge is a certain desire and, as it were, an investigating discovery. Hence, that which is without any difference in itself with respect to itself, is quiescent, and investigates nothing respecting itself."² It is so truly one that it does not even think itself and yet is not ignorant.

Finally, in stating that this Over-Soul is within us, Emerson agrees with Plotinus in his explanation that "as in the nature of things there are these three hypostases, so, likewise, it is proper to think, that the above mentioned three subsist with us."³ Emerson's exposi-

¹ *An Essay on the Beautiful*, 32.

² *Select Works*, 432.

³ *Ibid.*, 279.



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tion, then, of the Over-Soul is a highly concentrated series of Platonic conceptions, whose central life is to be found in the theorizing of Plotinus concerning the One. No better illustration of the way in which Emerson uses the shreds and patches of Platonic theory to express himself could be found.

In Emerson's most characteristic teaching, then, soul is conceived in a way that lifts it above the common view of its nature as the mere thinking and vital part of man. It is not a faculty. It is rather the Divine Presence itself in man striving to burn away all that is personal, so that He alone can give life to the individual soul. In this Divine Soul man participates; it is a larger thing than any one soul, so to speak, for it is the Over-Soul. Thus Emerson in his essay, *The Over-Soul*, at the outset of his explanation carefully defines his idea: "All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect or the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie—an immensity not possessed and cannot

be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all." ¹

Such psychology is in keeping with the conception of Plotinus. From Plato, Plotinus inherited the manner of conceiving spiritual notions under the figure of light. The part that the figure plays in his explanation of the mystical experiences of the soul is an important one. Thus he speaks of the mystical trance when the soul enjoys the presence of the One: "Then also it is requisite to believe that we have seen it, when the soul receives a sudden light. For this light is from him, and is him. And then it is proper to think that he is present, when like another God entering into the house of some one who invokes him, he fills it with splendour. For unless he entered, he would not illuminate it. And thus the soul would be without light, and without the possession of this God. But when illuminated, it has that which it sought for. This likeness is the true end to the soul, to come into contact with his light, and to behold him through it; not by the light of another thing; but to perceive that very thing itself

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 270.

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through which it sees. For that through which it is illuminated, is the very thing which it is necessary to behold.”¹

Emerson's account shows a direct connection with one of the Cambridge Platonists, John Smith, an extract from whose work appears in a note to a passage in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. To point the difference between reason and understanding Coleridge quotes from Smith's *Posthumous Tracts* (1660): “‘While we reflect on our own idea of Reason, we know that our souls are not it, but only partake of it; and that we have it *κατὰ μέθεξιν* and not *κατ’ οὐσίην*. Neither can it be called a faculty, but far rather a light, which we enjoy, but the source of which is not in ourselves, nor rightly by any individual to be denominated *mine*.’”² It is a conception of soul quite in keeping with Plotinus' conception and so tersely stated as to attract Emerson.

Holding to such a conception of soul, Plotinus finds the highest experience possible for man in a mystical state. Plato had never developed the mystical side of his doctrine as

¹ *Select Works*, 452-453.

² *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, I, 264, n.

it lay inherent in his conception of an absolute idea of the good which is above all being. Now the all-absorbing work of Plotinus was to formulate a scheme of mysticism on the basis of Plato. In so doing he brought to a logical culmination the preceding development of all Hellenic thought so that his work stands to-day as the flower of that philosophical life which started with Thales and Anaximander. His system is thus one of rational mysticism, which aims to show how the logical outcome of speculation on knowledge ends in an experience which transcends knowledge itself.

Such a scheme appealed to Emerson; it was as the water of life to his soul. His demand was for a philosophy of insight. He was dissatisfied with the ways of systematic philosophy; what he wanted above all things was a fresh contact with spiritual realities. "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"¹ The mystical

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 3.



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teaching of Plotinus satisfied these needs, as will appear when Emerson's work is reviewed in connection with the *Enneads* of Plotinus and other writings of members of his school.

Both Emerson and Plotinus agree in defining the mystic state as a union of the soul with God. "Ineffable is the union of man and God," writes Emerson, "in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God."¹ In his account of the experience Plotinus says of the soul: "Becoming wholly absorbed in deity, she is one, conjoining as it were centre with centre. For here concurring they are one; but they are then two when they are separate. . . . Since, therefore [in this conjunction with deity], there were not two things, but the perceiver was one with the thing perceived, as not being [properly speaking] vision, but union; whoever becomes one by mingling with deity, and afterwards recollects this union, will have with himself an image of it."²

Both describe the experience as a vision in which the two participants are one. Writing of the eternal One present in the soul of man,

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 292.

² *Select Works*, 502-503.

Emerson states as the peculiarity of the experience that "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object are one."¹ A like characteristic is put forward by Plotinus. "Perhaps, however, neither must it be said that he sees, but that he is the thing seen; if it is necessary to call these two things, i. e., the perceiver and the thing perceived. But both are one; though it is bold to assert this."²

Examined from another point of view, the relation is not thus boldly stated, but is changed to one in which the soul of the individual is enveloped by an all-embracing presence. In Iamblichus the contact with divinity is thus given: "We are comprehended in it, or rather we are filled by it, and we possess that very thing which we are [or by which our essence is characterized], in knowing the gods."³ In recounting his experience when the soul opens to a vision of the unity of things Emerson says of the beatitude: "It is not in us so much as we are in it."⁴ He repeats the idea in the same account.⁵ Speaking of mo-

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 269.

² *Select Works*, 502.

³ *On the Mysteries*, 24.

⁴ *Complete Works*, VI., 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VI., 26.



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ments of inspiration, Emerson uses the same form of statement—"We might say of these memorable moments of life that we were in them, not they in us."¹ It is a common expression with him.

In one of the Chaldean oracles the idea of envelopment is conveyed in a slightly varied form which Emerson also uses. Speaking of human souls, the oracle explains: "But they lie in God, drawing vigorous torches [i. e., unities, images of *the one*], descending from the father; and from these descending, the soul plucks of empyrean fruits, the soul-nourishing flower."² In language less technical and figurative Emerson conveys the thought underlying this oracle in his words—"We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity."³

Emerson even imitates perhaps the most impressive account which Plotinus has left of the experience. In one of his descriptions Plotinus closes with the conclusion—"This, therefore, is the life of the Gods, and of divine and happy men, a liberation from all terrene

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 279.

² *Select Works*, 343, note 1.

³ *Complete Works*, II., 64.

concerns, a life unaccompanied with human pleasures, and a flight of the alone to the alone." ¹ Such an experience Emerson calls "a beatitude, but without any sign of joy; earnest, solitary, even sad." ² And quoting Plotinus, he names it "the flight of the alone to the alone." ³ Consequently, in his *Over-Soul* he emphasizes the necessity of loneliness, of the putting away of all human mediation as the condition of the experience. "The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it." ⁴

The loneliness and sadness of the flight impressed him as is seen in his more elaborate attempt to bring out the unique character of the experience. "And now at last," he writes, "the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall

¹ *Select Works*, 506.

² *Complete Works*, IV., 97.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, II., 296.



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not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;—the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. You take the way from man, not to man. All persons that ever existed are its forgotten ministers. Fear and hope are alike beneath it. There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy.”¹

The note of loneliness in Plotinus' description of the mystic trance caught Emerson's ear and awakened a response within him. He loved solitude for the spiritual strengthening he found in it; and throughout his work he lays emphasis upon the need of it in life. “Ah me!” he complains, “no man goeth alone.”² “Let me admonish you,” he says to the Cambridge divinity students, “first of all, to go alone.”³ To gain self-reliance he says, “We must go alone.”⁴ “Think alone,” he holds, “and all places are friendly and sacred.”⁵ Of the poets who live as hermits in cities he

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 68-69.

² *Ibid.*, I., 144.

³ *Ibid.*, I., 145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II., 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I., 174.

writes: "They are alone with the mind."¹ In all these sentences is heard the echoing of that phrase of Plotinus which names the mystic experience "a flight of the alone to the alone."

In teaching receptivity as the attitude of the soul in this experience Emerson identifies himself with Plotinus. The latter held "that the nature of soul is everywhere tractable; and that it may be received the most easily of all things, if any thing is fashioned so as to be passive to it, and is able to receive a certain portion of it."² The same idea is given in Emerson's words: "When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come."³

Before such a mystic experience is possible there must be a putting off of all that is foreign so as to present the soul in pure nakedness. Thus Plotinus speaking of such abla-

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 175.

² *Select Works*, 347.

³ *Complete Works*, II., 268.



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tion remarks: "But as it is said of matter, that it ought to be void of all qualities, in order that it may receive the impressions of all things; thus also, and in a much greater degree, it is necessary that the soul should become formless, in order that there may be no impediment to its being filled and illuminated by the first principles of things."¹ "And how, therefore," he asks, "can this be accomplished? By an ablation of all things."² In such teaching we find the parallel to Emerson's reiterations of the necessity of humility as a condition of the mystic experience; as when he assures us: "This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whomsoever will put off what is foreign and proud."³

A second condition of enjoying the great experience is that the soul should be in a state of absolute oneness. As Plotinus puts it, "the soul, likewise, should for this purpose be liberated from all vice, in consequence of hastening to *the* [vision of the] *good*; and should ascend to the principle which is in herself, and

¹ *Select Works*, 491.

² *Ibid.*, 454.

³ *Complete Works*, II., 289.

become one instead of many things, in order that she may survey the principle of all things, and *the one*.”¹ Or, as Emerson says of one who reverences the soul, “he will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity.”² In this unified life, as has already been seen, Emerson finds the way to restore the world to its original beauty.

The feeling experienced by the soul in this union with the divine One is a nimble gladness. According to Plotinus when the soul sees God, “she will perceive herself to be a pure light, unburthened, agile.”³ “She is affected in the most felicitous manner.”⁴ Or as Emerson describes the feeling of the soul, “then is it glad, young and nimble.”⁵

The element of youthfulness in Emerson’s statement was imported into the experience from a source other than Plotinus: it is a suggestion from Proclus. In his own copy of Proclus *On the Theology of Plato* Emerson had indexed under “Youth” a passage from which the following is an extract: “For he

¹ *Select Works*, 476.

² *Complete Works*, II., 297.

³ *Select Works*, 500.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁵ *Complete Works*, II., 296.



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[Plato] says that souls in the Saturnian period abandon old age, but return to youth, and remove from themselves hoariness but have black hair; but the cheeks of those that have beards being rendered smooth, they are restored to the past season (of youth)."¹ In like vein Emerson writes: "We grizzle every day. I see no need of it. Whilst we converse with what is above us, we do not grow old, but grow young. Infancy, youth, receptive, aspiring, with religious eye looking upward, counts itself nothing and abandons itself to the instruction flowing from all sides. But the man and woman of seventy assume to know all, they have outlived their hope, they renounce aspiration, accept the actual for the necessary and talk down to the young. Let them then become organs of the Holy Ghost; let them be lovers; let them behold truth; and their eyes are uplifted, their wrinkles smoothed, they are perfumed again with hope and power."²

In spite of the attempt to describe the state, its ineffableness remains its chief feature. After his account of the union, Plotinus adds: "This spectacle is a thing difficult to explain

¹ I., 333.

² *Complete Works*, II., 319.

by words. For how can any one narrate that as something different from himself, which, when he sees he does not behold as different, but as one with himself? This, therefore, is manifested by the mandate of the mysteries, which orders that they shall not be divulged to those who are uninitiated. For as that which is divine cannot be unfolded to the multitude, this mandate forbids the attempt to elucidate it to any one but him who is fortunately able to perceive it.”¹ Similar to this are the utterances of Emerson: “I cannot—nor can any man—speak precisely of things so sublime, but it seems to me the wit of man, his strength, his grace, his tendency, his art, is the grace and the presence of God. It is beyond explanation.”² “Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable.”³

The absolute principle with which the soul aims to identify itself is also ineffable. “There is a principle which is the basis of

¹ *Select Works*, 502-503.

² *Complete Works*, I., 194.

³ *Ibid.*, II., 292.

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things," observes Emerson, "which all speech aims to say, and all action to evolve, a simple, quiet, undescribed, undescrivable presence, dwelling very peacefully in us, our rightful lord."¹ Plotinus names the One "the most simple of things." "Being alone and solitary," he adds, "it is perfectly quiescent."² He further observes: "Hence, it is in reality ineffable. For of whatever you speak, you speak of a certain thing. But of that which is beyond all things, and which is beyond even most venerable intellect, it is alone true to assert that it has not any other name [than the ineffable], and that it is not some one of all things. Properly speaking, however, there is no name of it, because nothing can be asserted of it. We, however, endeavour as much as possible to signify to ourselves something respecting it."³

Entrance into this high communion is not by knowledge or any reasoning process, but by an actual presence of the great principle in the soul of man. "In this affair," writes Plotinus, "a doubt especially arises, because the perception of the highest God is not ef-

¹ *Ibid.*, VI., 213.

² *Select Works*, 441, 429.

³ *Ibid.*, 439.

fectured by science, nor by intelligence, like other intelligibles, but by the presence of him, which is a mode of knowledge superior to that of science. But the soul suffers an apostacy from *the one*, and is not entirely one when it receives scientific knowledge. For science is reason, and reason is multitudinous. The soul, therefore, in this case, deviates from *the one*, and falls into number and multitude.”¹

In keeping with such an idea Emerson writes: “If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm.”² Man attempting to give an account of himself must be content to recite “the fact that there is a Life not to be described or known otherwise than by possession. What account can he give of his essence more than *so it was to be*? The royal reason, the Grace of God, seems the only description of our multiform, but ever identical fact. There is virtue, there is genius, there is success, or there is not. There is the incoming or the receding of God: that is all we can affirm; and we can show neither how nor why.”³

¹ *Select Works*, 479.

² *Complete Works*, II., 65.

³ *Ibid.*, I., 204.

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Such parallelisms of thought and at times of language strengthen the belief in the indebtedness of Emerson to Plotinus' account of philosophic mysticism. But such indebtedness does not preclude the genuineness of Emerson's own experience. His mind was in constant tension in the endeavor to describe its own feelings; and to no experience does he more often refer than to the divine moments of intuition. The range of the intuition is a wide one; it embraces at its highest ecstasy, trance, and prophetic inspiration, and at its lowest "the faintest glow of virtuous emotion."¹ In recording this milder form of the experience Emerson was but describing his own psychological states, but into his account he imports many facts which Plotinus had recorded. And in a degree, impossible now to indicate, Emerson made them facts of his own experience. It was his way to live out his teachings before he proclaimed them. Still the record reveals the traces of his reading and study.

A good instance of this blend of alien thought with his own experience is to be found in a personal feeling which he enjoyed in the presence of certain aspects of nature. "Stand-

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 281.

ing on the bare ground," he tells us, "my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty."¹

In this passage there are characteristic recollections of Platonic and Plotinic conceptions. The most startling expression—"I become a transparent eyeball"—is a rendering of a sentiment Emerson had noted in Plotinus, who, in order to describe the manner of knowledge in the intelligible world, writes: "There, however, everybody is pure, and each inhabitant is, as it were, an eye. Nothing likewise is there concealed, or fictitious, but before one can speak to another, the latter knows what the former intended to say."² The identification of himself in part with God is in keeping with what has already been said of the complete union of the soul with the

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 10.

² *Select Works*, 365.

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One. The fact that he is "the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty" recalls Plato's description of the idea of beauty as given in the *Banquet*: "It exists forever, being neither produced nor destroyed, and neither suffering increase nor decay . . . nor does it exist in any other being, such as an animal; nor in the earth, nor in the heavens, nor in any other part of the universe; but it subsists by and with itself, and possesses a form eternally one."¹

A more vital use of the doctrines of Platonism is found in Emerson's application of them to the realm of conduct. Among the ethical ideals which he sets forth self-reliance is central. It is central because it is a deduction from the reality of the mystical experience in the soul. The essence of that state lies in the identification of the soul with the Divine; the soul shares the power of the Divine; it is strong with the same strength. And the chief characteristic of the divine One, according to Plotinus, is its self-sufficiency; it is in need of nothing, but exists alone in itself. "That which is perfectly simple," says Plotinus of the One, "and truly self-sufficient, is not in want of any thing."² "For it does not seek

¹ Bohn translation, III., 552-553.

² *Select Works*, 440.

after any thing in order that it may be, nor in order that it may be in an excellent condition, nor that it may be there established. For being the cause of existence to other things, and not deriving that which it is from others, nor its happiness, what addition can be made to it external to itself? Hence its happiness, or the excellency of its condition, is not accidental to it. For it is itself [all that is sufficient to itself]. There is not likewise any place for it. For it is not in want of a foundation, as if it were not able to sustain itself. . . . But other things are established on account of *the one*, through which also they at the same time subsist, and have the place in which they are arranged. . . . Every thing which is said to be indigent, is indigent of a good condition, and of that which preserves it. Hence to *the one* nothing is good, and, therefore, neither is the wish for anything good to it. But it is *super-good*. And it is not good to itself, but to other things, which are able to participate of it.”¹

Adhering to such teachings, Emerson came to ground his doctrine of self-reliance on the reality of the mystic experience in which the One imparts its nature to all things which are

¹ *Select Works*, 487-489.

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resolved into it. Thus he writes in his essay, *Self-Reliance*: "This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this, as on every topic, the resolution of all into the ever-blessed One. {Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms.} All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain. Commerce, husbandry, hunting, whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight, are somewhat, and engage my respect as examples of its presence and impure action. I see the same law working in nature for conservation and growth. {Power is, in nature, the essential measure of right.} Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing and therefore self-relying soul." ¹

In this same experience Emerson also finds a corrective of the doctrine of indifferency. Into this state of mind he is led by a too literal application to the realm of conduct of the Pythagorean notion of antagonism. Such a

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 70-71.

theory taught that the harmony of the universe resulted from the mutual opposition of antagonistic forces. Blending the notion with the idea of a microcosm, Emerson came to hold that "the true doctrine of omnipresence is that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb. The value of the universe contrives to throw itself into every point. If the good is there, so is the evil; if the affinity, so the repulsion; if the force, so the limitation."¹ The logical outcome of such teaching he sees to be indifference. "Thus do all things preach the indifference of circumstances. The man is all. Everything has two sides, a good and an evil. Every advantage has its tax. I learn to be content. But the doctrine of compensation is not the doctrine of indifference. The thoughtless say, on hearing these representations—What boots it to do well? there is one event to good and evil; if I gain any good I must pay for it; if I lose any good I gain some other; all actions are indifferent."²

But Emerson cannot rest thus on the surface of things; he looks beyond the world of circumstantial good and evil to the inward world

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 101-102.

² *Ibid.*, II., 120.



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of the soul and there finds the solution of the question in the presence of the Divine which gives the soul its life. "There is a deeper fact in the soul," he writes, "than compensation, to-wit, its own nature. The soul is not a compensation, but a life. The soul *is*. Under all this running sea of circumstance, whose waters ebb and flow with perfect balance, lies the aboriginal abyss of real Being. Essence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole. Being is the vast affirmative, excluding negation, self-balanced, and swallowing up all relations, parts and times within itself. Nature, truth, virtue, are the influx from thence. Vice is the absence or departure of the same." ¹

This transference of the question from an outward world to an inward one recognizes the truth which Plotinus teaches concerning eternity. Eternity is identified with true being and "is the same with deity." ² "Indeed, he who surveys an abundant power collected into one," adds Plotinus, "according to this particular thing which is as it were a subject, he denominates it essence; afterwards, so far as he beholds life in it, he denominates it motion; and in the next place, he calls it perma-

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 120-121.

² *Select Works*, 188.

nency, so far as it entirely possesses an invariable sameness of subsistence. And he denominates it different and the same, so far as all these are at once one. Thus, therefore, composing these, so as to be at once one life alone, contracting in them difference, and beholding an unceasing sameness of energy, and which never passes from one intelligence or life to another, but always possesses the invariable, and is without interval; beholding all these, he will behold eternity. For he will perceive life abiding in sameness, and always possessing everything present, and not at one time this, and afterwards another thing, but containing all things at once, and not now some things, and again others. For it is an impartible end; just as in a point where all things subsist at once, and have not yet proceeded into a [linear] flux. It likewise abides in the same, i. e., in itself, and does not suffer any change. But it is always in the present, because nothing of it is past, nor again will be in future, but this very thing which it is, it always is." ¹

Opposed to this conception of being Emerson places vice, which he identifies with non-being. "Vice is the absence or departure of

¹ *Ibid.*, 181-182.



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the same [that is, of being]. Nothing, Falsehood, may indeed stand as the great Night or shade on which as a background the living universe paints itself forth, but no fact is begotten by it; it cannot work for it is not. It cannot work any good; it cannot work any harm. It is harm inasmuch as it is worse not to be than to be.”¹

Such a conception reflects the views of the Platonists on matter, which is the farthest removed from true being. “Since matter is neither soul nor intellect,” says Plotinus, “nor life, nor form, nor reason, nor bound; for it is infinite; nor power; for what can it effect; but falls off from all these, neither can it rightly receive the appellation of being. But it may deservedly be called non-being. . . . It likewise seems to be full and to be all things, and yet has nothing. But the things which enter into and depart from matter, are imitations and images of [real] beings, flowing about a formless resemblance; and on account of its formless nature are seen within it. They also appear, indeed, to effect something in it, but effect nothing; for they are vain and debile, and have no resisting power. And since matter, likewise, is void of resistance,

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 121.

they pervade without dividing it, like images in water, or as if some one should send as it were forms into what is called a vacuum.¹ . . . So that if someone should say that matter is evil, he will assert what is true, if he says it is impassive to *the good*, which is the same thing as to say, that it is entirely impassive."²

It is in these conceptions of the nature of being and non-being, then, that Emerson finds the solution of the question of compensation. The law is not one of indifferency based on the theory that "there is one event to good and evil; if I gain any good I must pay for it; if I lose any good I gain some other"; the law works in the spiritual world in a positive way. If the criminal adheres to his vice and contumacy, "inasmuch as he carries the malignity and the lie with him he so far deceases from nature."³ "Neither can it be said," Emerson adds, "that the gain of rectitude must be bought by any loss. There is no penalty to virtue; no penalty to wisdom; they are proper additions of being. In a virtuous action I properly *am*; in a virtuous act I add to the

¹ *Select Works*, 142-144.

² *Ibid.*, 153.

³ *Complete Works*, II., 121.

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world; I plant into deserts conquered from Chaos and Nothing and see darkness receding on the limits of the horizon.”¹ “There is no tax on the good of virtue, for that is the incoming of God himself, or absolute existence, without any comparative.”²

In such a manner does Emerson use the tenets of Platonism to explain the working of the great law of compensation which had held his attention from early boyhood. He begins his reasoning on the low level of outward circumstances which he is led to interpret from the standpoint of two theories embodied in the composite Platonism which he holds—the Pythagorean theory of the world as a harmony of mutually antagonistic elements and the Platonic notion of the microcosm. Each suggestion he develops to the full, but when they lead him to a logical outcome of the indifference of all moral conduct, he calls a halt and saves himself by introducing an idea of higher power, the doctrine of absolute being and non-being, which by the Platonists were identified with the good and the evil in the inward life. In this ascension the essay, *Compensation*, ends, with the idea of compen-

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 122.

² *Ibid.*

sation mysticized into the doctrine of the presence or the absence of the Divine in man as the index of virtue or vice.

This result means the final relegation of the Pythagorean element in Emerson's Platonism to a subordinate place. A love of contrasts and of a conception of unity arising out of diverse elements had led Emerson to overdevelop the Pythagorean notion of the universe as a harmony of antagonistic elements. Plato, it is true, uses the categories of the Pythagoreans, but not to the extent of justifying the prominence that Emerson gave to the notion in his conception of Plato's system; nor does the scheme of Plotinus justify Emerson. It is a clear case of over-statement, the outcome of which speaks much for the corrective influence played by Platonism in Emerson's thinking; it always lies near at hand as a body of thought to guide, to suggest, or to correct his thinking.

Such a controlling influence does Platonism exert over Emerson's mind that he finds in its mystical teachings a solution of the questions which the study of the meaning of nature raised. He had gone on the assumption that nature was so intimately allied with the mind of man that "undoubtedly we have no ques-



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tions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy.”¹ { If, then, a mystical experience is the highest experience life can know, the highest truths concerning nature can be known only by virtue of such an experience. Nature, then, must be mysticized.

As has been noted already, the method of nature is presented by Emerson as an eternal flux or change due to a superabundance of energy in a metaphysical source. As he views this ceaseless energy he calls it by the name which Plotinus had given to the mystic experience. Plotinus describes the participant in such an experience as “being as it were in an ecstasy, or energizing enthusiastically.”² Emerson applies the term *ecstasy* to the method of nature. “In short, the spirit and peculiarity of that impression nature makes on us is this, that it does not exist to any one or to any number of particular ends, but to a numberless and endless benefit; that there is in it no private will, no rebel leaf or limb, but the whole is oppressed by one superincumbent

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 3-4.

² *Select Works*, 503.

tendency, obeys that redundancy or excess of life which in conscious beings we call *ecstasy*.”¹

When Emerson retired to Nantasket Beach to write *The Method of Nature* he took with him Plato's *Phædrus*, *Meno*, and *Banquet*, which he diligently read. He also had with him Proclus, Ocellus Lucanus and certain Pythagorean Fragments, either those of Demophilus, or those to be found in the *Life of Pythagoras* by Iamblichus.² It is natural, then, to expect a decided influence in his essay of such reading.

Now Ocellus Lucanus, in a short treatise, set forth the eternal nature of the universe as it was understood by the Platonists. “It is credible,” he says, “that the universe is without beginning, and without an end, from its figure, from motion, from time and its essence; and, therefore, it may be concluded that the world is unbegotten and incorruptible: for the form of its figure is circular; but a circle is on all sides similar and equal, and is, therefore, without a beginning, and without an end. The motion, also, of the universe is circular, but this motion is stable and without

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 203-204.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 310.

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transition. Time, likewise, in which motion exists is infinite, for this neither had a beginning, nor will have an end of its circulation. The essence, too, of the universe is without egression [into any other place], and is immutable, because it is not naturally adapted to be changed, either from the worse to the better, or from the better to the worse. From all these arguments, therefore, it is obviously credible that the world is unbegotten and incorruptible.”¹

Such a conception was easily caught up by Emerson. It taught the eternity of nature whose operations indicated a ceaseless round of energizing. Emerson's adherence to the truth of the correlation of matter and mind made it easy to transfer the idea of ecstasy, which strictly applies to conscious beings, to the method of nature. He thus speaks of nature as “a work of *ecstasy*, to be represented by a circular movement, as intention might be signified by a straight line of definite length.”²

But this application of the doctrine of correlation leads to a palpable over-statement. Usually, Emerson argues from a law of nature to a law of mind; but in this case he

¹ *On the Nature of the Universe*, 8-9.

² *Complete Works*, I., 201.

has done the reverse. Ecstasy is attributed to nature and not deduced from her method. It is true that in the opening of his essay he approaches the subject in his usual manner of studying nature for what it reveals of the mind, but in reality it is the idea of ecstasy as a law of the mind that forms the true subject of his work. Its closing part thus shows how there is no function or office in man but is rightly discharged by this divine method. True science is ecstatic. In the pursuit of virtue he who aims at progress should aim at an infinite, not a special benefit. The law of ecstasy holds also in love, in genius, and in history. Filled with the idea, then, he strained truth somewhat in boldly teaching ecstasy as the law of nature.

Emerson is more successful in identifying man and nature when he describes the mystic experience. A complete union of the soul of man with the Divine means an absolute oneness of man with all things as well. "In that deep force," he writes, "the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but

one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we have shared their cause.”¹

This is a conception of being which Plotinus had taught him to appreciate. “This is that which is entirely being,” writes Plotinus; “and this again is that which in no respect is deficient in existence. But since it is perfectly being, it is not in want of any thing in order that it may be preserved and be, but to other things which appear to be, it is the cause of their apparent existence. . . . It is necessary, however, that it should be perfectly being. Hence it is requisite it should accede to existence, possessing all things in itself, and being at once all things, and one all, if by these peculiarities we define being.”²

The mysticism of Plotinus was also effective in providing another solution of the question of the origin of the outward universe. When we ask the questions, Whence is matter? and Whereto? we learn, so Emerson tells us, “that the highest is present to the soul of man;

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 64.

² *Select Works*, 137-138.

that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old.”¹

In such a statement is recognized the teaching of Plotinus regarding the creative power of souls. “It is requisite,” he holds, “that there should not only be souls, but that their effects also should have a perspicuous subsistence (since every nature possesses an essential ability of producing something posterior to itself, and of unfolding it into light from its occult subsistence in dormant power), and this as if from a certain indivisible principle and seed, proceeding to a sensible extremity, while that which has a priority of subsistence always abides in its proper seat, but that which

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 63-64.


is consequent is generated from an ineffable power, such as belongs to superior beings, and is the proper characteristic of their nature.”¹

A similar explanation Plotinus gives in his doctrine of the emanation of all things from the One. Of the One he writes: “What shall we say he is? The power of all things, without whose subsistence the universality of things would never have had a being; nor would intellect have been, which is the first and universal life; for that which subsists above life is the cause of life: since energy of life, which is all things, is not the first, but emanates from this principle as its ineffable fountain. . . . Or conceive the life of a mighty tree, propagating itself through the whole tree, the principle at the same time remaining without being divided through the whole, but, as it were, established in the root; this, then, will afford an universal and abundant life to the tree, but will abide itself, without multiplication, and subsisting as the principle of multitude.”²

As a result of the doctrine of emanation, Emerson regards nature as a perpetual effect. She is passive to the presence of the Divine

¹ *Five Books of Plotinus*, 275-276.

² *Ibid.*, 237-238.



power just as man should be; her passiveness corresponds to man's humility. "The aspect of Nature is devout," Emerson holds. "Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship."¹

Such conceptions reflect the teachings of Plotinus. His system had ended in establishing the absolute self-sufficiency of the One as well as the absolute nonentity of matter. Between these two extremes was a series of beings who owe all their life to a power over them of which the One is the ultimate source. By submission, then, matter was endowed with quality and so likewise soul. And though the life of the soul seems an upward progress with a union of itself with the One as its end, yet in reality this progress is made by ridding itself of all its characteristic life in order to unite itself with the Divine. Submission, therefore, becomes the one necessary condition on which nature and man can hope to have being: for their life is given to them by this Over-Soul.

In the treatment of the Over-Soul we can appreciate the hold which the system of

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 61.

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Plotinus had upon Emerson's way of thought. Toward the end of *Nature* he reviews his attempts to explain matter and he finds them deficient. The theories of symbolism and correlation of mind and matter did not suffice. They suggested spirit, but they left God out of him. In other words, he finds these idealistic theories inadequate to explain the meaning of the universe; idealism is but "a useful introductory hypothesis, serving to apprise us of the eternal distinction between soul and the world."¹ It is to mysticism, then, that he turns for the final solution.

Mysticism thus becomes the most important element in Emerson's Platonism. In his review of Plato he notes the absence of this element in Plato's work. Yet he holds that "mysticism finds in Plato all its texts;"² and he agrees with the Platonists in making Plato do honor to the ineffable One, which it is the object of mysticism to realize in the experience of man. But Emerson does not find Plato teaching this doctrine, for he remarks of him, "he never writes in ecstasy, or catches us up into poetic raptures."³ This mystic

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 63.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 40.

³ *Ibid.*, IV., 61.

enjoyment Plotinus afforded him. It was natural, then, that he should find Plotinus the great need of his life at one time; for in him he became acquainted with a scheme of thought in which mysticism of the purest intellectual type was taught.

II.

INTELLECT.

The mysticism of Plotinus is a rational mysticism; it arises as a logical result of a purely rational conception of knowledge. It is an experience which intellect enjoys, intellect being the principle of soul next in order to the One, or the principle of unity. Thus it comes about that Plotinus and the Platonists have much to say of intellect. And as teachers of the intellect Emerson esteems the Platonists most highly.

In his primary conception of intellect Emerson is one with the Platonists. "How can we speak of the action of the mind under any divisions, as of its knowledge, of its ethics, of its works, and so forth, since it melts will into perception, knowledge into act? Each becomes the other. Itself alone is. Its vision

is not like the vision of the eye, but is union with the things known.”¹ Such is the teaching of Plotinus also. Describing intellect, he writes in a sentence, a part of which Emerson appropriates, “It likewise alone *is*, and *is* always, but is never *future*; for when the future arrives, it then also *is*; nor is it the *past*.”² He furthermore holds: “Whatever it possesses, it possesses from itself. But if it perceives intellectually by and from itself, it is itself that which it perceives.”³

Emerson also agrees with the teaching of Platonism in holding that all thought is but a reception rather than a self-directed activity of the mind from within outward. “Our thinking,” he holds, “is a pious reception. Our truth of thought is therefore vitiated as much by too violent direction given by our will, as by too great negligence. We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away as well as we can all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see.”⁴ More explicitly, thought “is the advent of truth into the world, a form of thought now for the first time bursting into

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 323.

² *Select Works*, 263.

³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁴ *Complete Works*, II., 328.

the universe, a child of the old eternal soul, a piece of genuine and immeasurable greatness." ¹

In the manner in which according to Plotinus the One gives birth to Intellect is found the method of reasoning which Emerson uses in describing all thinking as reception. The One is self-sufficient and, therefore, is in need of no creatures for its own satisfaction. And yet it possesses such superabundant energy that it overflows; and this overflow constitutes potential intellect. "For *the one*," writes Plotinus, "being perfect, in consequence of not seeking after, or possessing, or being in want of anything, it becomes as it were overflowing, and the super-plenitude of it produces something else. That, however, which is generated from it is converted to it, and is filled, and was generated looking to it. But this is intellect." ² Thus conversion to the One constitutes the essence of intellect; the state previous to this conversion can be only potentially intellectual. And this conversion to the One is what Emerson means in his teaching that all thought is but a pious reception.

At the same time that Emerson views think-

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 335.

² *Select Works*, 398.

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ing as a pious reception, he also describes it as an ascending process of mind in search of an absolute cause. This is the conception underlying his essay, *Circles*. "Our life," he says, "is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens."¹

It is the same process that Plato and the Platonists call the dialectic, or the ascension of mind from particulars to universals. "It is requisite," observes Simplicius, in the description of this process of mind, which Emerson had marked in his copy of Proclus, "that he who ascends to the principle of things should investigate whether it is possible there can be anything better than the supposed principle; and if something more excellent is found, the same inquiry should again be made respecting that, till we arrive at the highest conceptions, than which we have no longer any more venerable. Nor should we stop in our ascent till we find this to be the case. For there is no occasion to fear that our progression will be through an unsubstantial

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 301.

void, by conceiving something about the first principles which is greater and more transcendent than their nature. For it is not possible for our conceptions to take such a mighty leap as to equal, and much less to pass beyond the dignity of the first principles of things.”¹

Receptivity and the onward progress of the dialectic seem inconsistent ideas. Both are found, however, in Plotinus. The dialectic he inherited from Plato but the idea of receptivity is one which he was logically compelled to accept by reason of his insistence upon the nature of the One as the source of all things and yet as a principle apart from all things and in no need of them. Only by putting itself in a passive state could a being beneath the One receive its influence. The life of the intellect is thus a progress of the soul ever ascending into new realms but ever divesting itself of all it has received in the realm it has just passed through. These two ideas—that of the dialectic and that of thought as reception—Emerson takes over from Plotinus and makes no attempt to reconcile them. He treats each as it suits his purpose.

Emerson agrees with Platonism in teach-

¹ Quoted in Proclus, *On the Theology of Plato*, I., Introduction, p. 32.

ing that intellect has power to annul fate. Fate he finds everywhere, "in matter, mind, morals; in race, in retardations of strata, and in thought and character as well."¹ And by fate he means laws of the world, fate being felt as bound or limitation.² But he maintains: "Intellect annuls fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free."³ He explains this triumph of thought over fate more fully. "The revelation of Thought takes man out of servitude into freedom. We rightly say of ourselves, we were born and afterward we were born again, and many times . . . The day of days, the great day of the feast of life, is that in which the inward eye opens to the Unity in things, to the omnipresence of law:—sees that what is must be and ought to be, or is the best . . . If truth come to our mind we suddenly expand to its dimensions, as if we grew to worlds. We are as law-givers; we speak for Nature: we prophesy and divine."⁴

In stating this doctrine Emerson is following the argument of Proclus *On Providence*

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 21.

² *Ibid.*, VI., 4, 21-22.

³ *Ibid.*, VI., 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, VI., 25.

and Fate. Proclus' conception of fate is one with Emerson's. "If therefore, not only in us, and other animals and plants," observes Proclus, "but in this universe also much prior to bodies, there is one nature of the world, which is corrective and motive of the subsistence of bodies; as it is also in us, (or why do we call all bodies the progeny of nature?), it is indeed necessary that nature should be the cause of things that are connected, and that in this what we call Fate should be investigated. And on this account perhaps the dæmoniacal Aristotle also is accustomed to call those augmentations or generations which are effected beside the accustomed time, *deviations from Fate.* And the divine Plato says, 'that the world considered by itself, without the intellectual Gods, is convolved as being corporeal by Fate and innate desire.' The oracles of the gods also accord with these and bear witness to our demonstrations when they say: 'Look not upon Nature, for the name of it is fatal.' And thus we have discovered what Fate is, and how it is the nature of this world, and a certain incorporeal essence." ¹ Fate thus becomes identi-

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 450.



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fied with the operations of nature. Or as Emerson puts it, "the book of Nature is the book of fate."¹

It is to be noted that the oracle referred to is used by Emerson. "It is wholesome to man," he observes, "to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other. His sound relation to these facts is to use and command, not to cringe to them. 'Look not on Nature for her name is fatal,' said the oracle. The too much contemplation of these limits induces meanness."²

Proclus also teaches that the way of escape from fate is through the intellectual activity of the soul. "In short, we must say," he writes, "that the rational and intellectual soul in whatever way it may energize, is beyond body and sense; and therefore it is necessary that it should have an essence separable from both these. This, however, though of itself now evident, I will again manifest from hence, that when it energizes according to nature, it is superior to the influence of Fate, but that when it falls into sense, and becomes irrational and corporeal, it follows the natures that are beneath it, and living with them as

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 15.

² *Ibid.*, VI., 23.

with intoxicated neighbours, is held in subjection by a cause that has dominion over things that are different from the rational essence." ¹ And the highest form of intellectual action, he tells us, "is obtained by exciting the profundity of the soul, which is no longer intellectual, and adapting it to union with *the one*." ² It is the same mystic experience that Emerson refers to as the day "in which the inward eye opens to the Unity of things." ³

As an inference from the superior power of intellect to rise above the limitations of fate Emerson presents a slightly new conception of fate. "Fate then," he concludes, "is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; for causes which are unpenetrated." ⁴ It is, however, in accordance with the notion of Proclus who holds that "we denominate that which is evolved through many causes complicated with each other and unknown to us, no otherwise than Fate." ⁵

Emerson also agrees with the Platonists in the conception of the ascendancy of intellect over time. As Proclus states it, "Every in-

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 456.

² *Ibid.*, 464.

³ *Complete Works*, VI., 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, VI., 31.

⁵ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 447.



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tellect has its essence, power and energy in eternity.”¹ Emerson shares the same belief when he states: “All our intellectual action, not promises but bestows a feeling of absolute existence. We are taken out of time and breathe a purer air. I know not whence we draw the assurance of prolonged life, of a life which shoots that gulf we call death and takes hold of what is real and abiding, by so many claims as from our intellectual history.”²

On this power of intellect Emerson bases his belief in immortality. “This is the way we rise,” he tells us. “Within every man’s thought is a higher thought—within the character he exhibits to-day a higher character. The youth puts off the illusions of the child, the man puts off the ignorance and the tumultuous passions of youth; proceeding thence puts off the egotism of manhood, and becomes at last a public and universal soul. He is rising to greater heights, but also rising to realities; the outer relations and circumstances dying out, he entering deeper into God, God into him, until the last garment of egotism falls, and he is with God—shares the

¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

² *Complete Works*, VIII., 340.

will and the immensity of the First Cause.”¹

It is a way of reasoning that Plotinus had taught him. “Now, however, men perceiving that the soul of the greater part of the human race is defiled with vice, they do not reason about it either as a divine or an immortal thing. But it is necessary, in considering the nature of everything, to direct our attention to the purity of it; since whatever is added, is always an impediment to the knowledge of that to which it is added. Consider the soul, therefore, by taking away [that which is extraneous]; or rather, let him who takes this away survey himself, and he will believe himself to be immortal, when he beholds himself in the intelligible world, and situated in a pure abode. For he will perceive intellect seeing not anything sensible, nor any of these mortal objects, but by an eternal power contemplating that which is eternal; everything in the intelligible world, and itself also being then luminous, in consequence of being enlightened by the truth proceeding from *the good*, which illuminates all intelligibles with reality. By such a soul as this, therefore, it may be properly said,

¹ *Ibid.*, VIII., 348-349.

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Farewell, a God immortal now am I,
having ascended to divinity, and earnestly
striving to become similar to him.”¹

A less mystic explanation of the manner in which intellectual activity makes for immortality is found in the feeling of absoluteness attendant upon the vision of truth. “Salt,” Emerson explains, “is a good preserver; cold is: but a truth cures the taint of mortality better, and ‘preserves from harm until another period.’ A sort of absoluteness attends all perception of truth—no smell of age, no hint of corruption. It is self-sufficing, sound, entire.”²

As the quotation Emerson uses shows, the idea is Plato’s. In his *Phædrus* Plato explains how the human soul, which is immortal, lived in the eternal world before it appeared on earth. Its main care in that world was to behold truth. “And this is the reason,” Plato adds, “for the great anxiety to behold the field of truth, where it is; the proper pasture for the best part of the soul happens to be in the meadow there, and it is the nature of the wing by which the soul is borne aloft, to be nourished by it; and this is a

¹ *Select Works*, 243.

² *Complete Works*, VIII., 340.

law of Adrastia, that whatever soul, in accompanying a deity, has beheld any of the true essences, it shall be free from harm until the next revolution, and if it can always accomplish this, it shall be always free from harm.”¹

Eternity, then, in which intellect has its being, takes the place in Emerson's thought of immortality; it involves, as he says, “not duration but a state of abandonment to the Highest, and so the sharing of His perfection.”² “Is immortality,” he asks, “only an intellectual quality, or, shall I say, only an energy, there being no passive? He has it, and he alone, who gives life to all names, persons, things where he comes. No religion, not the wildest mythology dies for him; no art is lost. He vivifies what he touches. Future state is an illusion for the ever-present state. It is not length of life, but depth of life. It is not duration, but a taking of the soul out of time, as all high action of the mind does: when we are living in the sentiments we ask no questions about time. The spiritual world takes place—that which is always the same.”³

¹ Bohn translation, I., 324.

² *Complete Works*, VIII., 349.

³ *Ibid.*, 347.



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This conception is identical with the teaching of Platonism. "According to the oracle," says Proclus, "eternity is the cause of never-failing life, of unwearied power, and unsluggish energy. . . . Eternity is the father and supplier of infinite life; since eternity is also the cause of all immortality—and perpetuity. And Plotinus, exhibiting, in a most divinely inspired manner, the peculiarity of eternity, according to the theology of Plato defines it to be infinite life, at once unfolding into light the whole of itself, and its own being . . . For eternity is infinite power abiding in one, and proceeding stably."¹

In his conception of intellect, then, Emerson agrees with the teachings of Platonism in regarding the nature of the intellect's vision as an actual union with the thing seen, in holding that thinking is receptivity and at the same time an onward progress of the mind, and in maintaining the triumph of intellect over fate and time.

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 190-191.

III.

THE WORLD-SOUL.

Thus far Emerson has spoken of soul as present chiefly in the consciousness of men; but he holds with the Platonists that there is a soul at work in the universe outside of man as well as in his inward life. This is with him "the sublime creed that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool; and whatever opposes that will is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise."¹

This belief corresponds to the tenet of Universal Soul taught by Platonism. Below the One and Intellect is the Anima Mundi, the Universal Soul, which is the intermediating principle between the world of pure intelligence and the world of matter. "Every soul," writes Plotinus, "ought to consider in the first place, that soul produced all animals, and inspired them with life: viz., those animals which the earth and sea nourish, those which live in the air, and the divine stars contained

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 123-124.

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in the heavens. Soul also made the sun; soul made and adorned this mighty heaven. Soul, too, circumvolves it in an orderly course, being of a nature different from the things which it adorns, which it moves, and causes to live, and is necessarily more honourable than these. . . . What the mode is, however, by which life is supplied to the universe, and to each of its parts, may be considered to be as follows: . . . Let a quiet soul behold that other mighty soul, externally as it were, on all sides flowing and infused into, penetrating and illuminating the quiescent mass. For just as the rays of the sun darting on a dark cloud cause it to become splendid, and golden to the view, thus also, soul entering into the body of heaven gave it life, gave it immortality, and excited it from its torpid state. But heaven being moved with a perpetual motion, through the guidance of a wise soul, became a blessed animal. It also acquired dignity through soul becoming its inhabitant, since, prior to soul it was a dead body, viz., earth and water, or rather the darkness of matter and non-entity; and as some one says, 'that which the Gods abhor.'"¹

Emerson uses the conception of the Anima

¹ *Select Works*, 256-258.

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Mundi in his poem, *The World-Soul*. As a refuge, from the vice of men in the centers of wealth and trade he turns to glances of a spirit which haunts him, in the broad aspects of nature, in human beings, in strains of music. Its secret has never been fully solved but its operations in the world are constant and relentless. "But soul," observes Plotinus, speaking of the soul of the world, "by the power of essence has dominion over bodies in such a way, that they are generated and subsist, just as she leads them, since they are unable from the first to oppose her will."¹ Or as Emerson puts it:

"For Destiny never swerves
Nor yields to men the helm;
He shoots his thoughts, by hidden nerves,
Throughout the solid realm.
The patient Daemon sits,
With roses and a shroud;
He has his way, and deals his gifts—
But ours is not allowed."²

In this power Emerson finds the hope of the world, which will be fulfilled in a fairer

¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

² *Complete Works*, IX., 18.

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world which the world-soul will create out of this one.

A finer poetic result of Emerson's musings on the world-soul is to be found in his little lyric, *Music*, in which he works out a suggestion he found in a note appended by Taylor to a passage in Proclus. Commenting on the mutual sympathy shared by all things in the universe, Taylor remarks that he who holds to such a belief "will survey the universe as one great animal, all whose parts are in union and consent with each other; so that nothing is foreign and detached; nothing, strictly speaking, void of sympathy and life. For though parts of the world, when considered as separated from the whole, are destitute of *peculiar* life; yet they possess some degree of animation, however inconsiderable, when viewed with relation to the universe. Life indeed may be compared to a perpetual and universal sound; and the soul of the world resembles a lyre, or some other musical instrument, from which we may suppose this sound to be emitted. But from the unbounded diffusion as it were of the mundane soul, everything participates of this harmonical sound, in greater or less perfection, according to the dignity of its nature. So that while life

everywhere resounds, the most abject of beings may be said to retain a faint echo of the melody produced by the mundane lyre."¹

In the last sentence of this quotation is the motif of Emerson's poem, *Music*.

"Let me go where'er I will,
I hear a sky-born music still:
It sounds from all things old,
It sounds from all things young,
From all that's fair, from all that's foul,
Peals out a cheerful song.

'It is not only in the rose,
It is not only in the bird,
Not only where the rainbow glows,
Nor in the song of woman heard,
But in the darkest, meanest things
There always, always something sings.

"'Tis not in the high stars alone,
Nor in the cup of budding flowers,
Nor in the redbreast's mellow tone,
Nor in the bow that smiles in showers,
But in the mud and scum of things
There always, always something sings."

And thus it appears that Emerson follows

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 395, note 1.



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the Platonists in their account of the spiritual principles of the universe. His doctrines of the Over-soul, of Intellect, of a World-Soul are in general agreement with the three principles of the Platonists. But he is not careful to distinguish them scientifically as the Platonists do; they all go to inform his conception of Soul. Soul he thus finds everywhere in the highest and lowest of created things; but his main purpose was to assert its presence, the presence of the Divine, in man, who comes to experience it in a mystical resolution of his own life into that of the Divine. This is the center of Emerson's thought, as it was of Plotinus', and it shows itself in his repeated emphasis upon the need of soul in life. So absorbing is this power of soul that it includes not only the life of man but the very life of nature.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE AND BEAUTY

A DISCUSSION of love and beauty figures somewhat conspicuously in Emerson's work. In his examination into the meaning of nature he finds beauty serving a noble want of man. To this subject he devotes a separate essay in his *Conduct of Life* and he gives a poetical rendering of the theme in the *Ode to Beauty*. Likewise in his treatment of love, a separate essay deals with the question and his poem *Initial, Dæmonic and Celestial Love* presents the subject in a poetical trilogy. Reference to such topics is frequent in his work; for as an admirer of Platonism he came to feel the inspiration which its philosophy of love and beauty stirs within the mind of all its true students.

Plenty of material in his Platonic sources was at hand. Plato had given impetus to the discussion in his *Banquet* and *Phædrus*. His quickening influence is felt in Plutarch, who leaves a dialogue on love, and in Plotinus

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whose discussions on beauty, especially, are of first importance in the history of æsthetics. In Taylor's translation of a portion of his *Enneads, An Essay on the Beautiful* (1792), Emerson had an available source. In the translation of the *Select Works of Plotinus* he also found a valuable extract *On Intelligible Beauty*, which he carefully indexed and thoroughly digested. Proclus in his *On the Theology of Plato* provided him with an exposition which Emerson's index shows was one of his "lustres." In his *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* the same author left other patches of theorizing on beauty. Emerson availed himself of all these sources and in his writings on love and beauty conforms rather strictly to the method of the Platonists.

His *Initial, Dæmonic and Celestial Love*, as its title indicates, is a recognition of a division of the subject which Plato had made in his *Banquet*. There in the speech of one of the characters, Pausanias, he laid down the distinction between a celestial love and a vulgar love which persisted throughout the entire course of Neo-Platonic speculation.¹ Through the mouth of another speaker, Soc-

¹ Bohn translation, III., 491.

rates, who hands down the idea of a certain prophetic, Diotima, Plato also explains that love is "a great dæmon . . . and being in the middle space between gods and men it fills up the whole."¹ Emerson's *Initial, Dæmonic and Celestial Love* thus recognizes the distinction which Plato had made. In developing the subject the influence of Platonism makes itself felt especially in the second and third parts—*Dæmonic* and *Celestial Love*.

In setting forth his conception of dæmonic love Emerson avails himself of what the ancients had said about dæmons. Plato's reference to these had started a discussion among the Platonists, which in Plutarch, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus was prolific of much speculation. The subject evidently attracted Emerson who fortunately has left an abstract of his views as gathered from his sources. "The ancients believed," he writes, "that a genius or demon took possession at birth of each mortal, to guide him; that these genii were sometimes seen as a flame of fire partly immersed in the bodies which they governed; on an evil man, resting on his head; in a good man, mixed with his substance. They

¹ *Ibid.*, III., 533.

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thought the same genius, at the death of its ward, entered a new born child, and they pretended to guess the pilot by the sailing of the ship.”¹

This is an abstract from several sources. In Iamblichus' *Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*, Emerson found in a foot note by Taylor the remark: “According to the Egyptians every one received his proper dæmon at the hour of his birth.”² And in the text of the same work he had noted that “there is one dæmon who is the guardian and governor of everything that is in us.”³ In Plutarch's dialogue *A Discourse Concerning Socrates's Dæmon*, Emerson found an account of the connection between men and dæmons on which he bases the second part of his statement. “Every soul doth not mix herself after one sort,” Plutarch observes, “for some plunge themselves into the body, and so in this life their whole frame is corrupted by appetite and passion; others are mixed as to some part, but the purer part still remains without the body—it is not drawn down into it, but it swims above, and touches the ex-

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 287.

² p. 320, note.

³ p. 322.

trement part of the man's head; it is like a cord to hold up and direct the subsiding part of the soul, as long as it proves obedient and is not overcome by the appetites of the flesh. That part that is plunged into the body is called the soul, but the uncorrupted part is called the mind, and the vulgar think it is within them as likewise they imagine the image reflected from a glass to be in that. But the more intelligent, who know it to be without, call it a Dæmon."¹

It is to be noted, however, that Emerson does not follow Plutarch's distinction between the dæmon in the good and in the evil man. In Plutarch the dæmon remains above the good man; in Emerson the dæmon in the good man is mixed throughout his substance and in the bad man rests upon his head. This difference may be due to an inaccurate interpretation of Plutarch; or, it may be, that in his account Emerson has blended the notion which Proclus gives of the dæmon of Socrates, who "according to the energy of his dæmon, received the light proceeding from thence, neither in his dianoëtic part alone, nor in his doxastic powers, but also in his spirit, the illumination of the dæmon

¹ *Morals*, II., 410.

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suddenly diffusing itself through the whole of his life, and now moving sense itself.”¹

The final portion of Emerson's statement refers to a passage in Plutarch's dialogue which Emerson himself extracts in his essay on Plutarch. “Early this morning, asking Epaminondas about the manner of Lysis's burial, I found that Lysis had taught him as far as the incommunicable mysteries of our sect; and that the same Dæmon that waited on Lysis, presided over him, if I can guess at the pilot from the sailing of the ship.”²

These beliefs concerning the dæmon Emerson works into his poem, *Dæmonic Love*:

“Close, close to men,
Like undulating layer of air,
High above their heads,
The potent plain of Dæmons spreads.
Stands to each human soul its own,
For watch and ward and furtherance,
In the snares of Nature's dance;
And the lustre and the grace
To fascinate each youthful heart,
Beaming from its counterpart,
Translucent through the mortal covers,
Is the Dæmon's form and face.

¹ Quoted in *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, I., 22-23.

² *Morals*, II., 399.

To and fro the Genius hies—
 A gleam which plays and hovers
 Over the maiden's head,
 And dips sometimes as low as to her eyes." ¹

In this passage there is a recognition of the existence of a guardian spirit over each human soul and of the manner of its appearance as Plutarch had given it in his picturesque explanation of the relation between the dæmon and its ward, the soul. In developing the idea of a multitude of dæmons above us Emerson was working in accordance with a note on the benevolent dæmons given by Taylor in his *Plato*: "They stand," he writes of the dæmons, "as it were over our heads, discourse with each other, and in the mean time speculate our affairs, disapprove our evil deeds, and commend such as are good." ²

The conception of dæmonic love set forth in Emerson is two fold. Dæmonic love is first presented as a love of beauty in its noble purity. This beauty snaps all the ties the soul has recognized and leads the soul to follow in its quest. The dæmons lend this alluring beauty unto men. But there is another race of dæmons who skirt man's path with strength

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 110.

² III., 343, note 1.

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and terror.¹ That is, there are evil dæmons as well as good and an evil dæmonic love along with a noble kind.

The evil kind of dæmonic love is characteristic of those geniuses who exult in their own intellectual prowess and insult the multitude; it is a love springing out of the pride of intellect. Thus the inspiring dæmons of this evil love are described:

“The Dæmons are self-seeking
Their fierce and limitary will
Draws men to their likeness still.”²

This idea is in keeping with what Synesius writes of evil dæmons: “These dæmons, who are the progeny of matter wish to make souls their own, and the manner in which they attack them is as follows: It is not possible in the earth that there should be someone who has not a portion of the irrational soul . . . Evil dæmons through this, as through that which is allied to them, invade and betray the animal. . . . Thus dæmons inflame desire, thus they inflame anger, and all such evils as are the sisters of these; associating with souls through the parts that are adapted to

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., III.

² *Ibid.*

themselves, which naturally perceive the presence of the dæmons, and are excited and corroborated by them, rising against intellect, till they either vanquish the whole soul, or despair of its caption."¹

Of the fate of these destructive dæmons Emerson writes:

"Therefore comes an hour from Jove
Which his ruthless will defies,
And the dogs of Fate unties."²

This means the destruction of the dæmon and his work.

The suggestion probably came from Cudworth, who speaks of "those Empedoclean demons lapsed from heaven, and pursued with divine vengeance,"³ which Plutarch had referred to.⁴ These dæmons had been driven out of heaven by the offended gods and forced to wander about in restless torment. The parallel, at any rate, is quite in keeping with Emerson's way of using the fragments of mythology he found in Cudworth.

In his treatment of celestial love also the tenets of Platonism are boldly expressed. In

¹ *On Providence*, in *Select Works of Plotinus*, 535.

² *Complete Works*, IX., 113.

³ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 47.

⁴ Plutarch, *Morals*, V., 420-421.

keeping with the scheme of an ascending scale of love which Platonism had developed, Emerson places celestial love at the summit.

“Higher far into the pure realm,
 Over sun and star,
 Over the flickering Dæmon film,
 Thou must mount for love;
 Into vision where all form
 Into one only form dissolves;
 In a region where the wheel
 On which all beings ride
 Visibly revolves;
 Where the starred, eternal worm
 Girds the world with bound and term;
 Where unlike things are like;
 Where good and ill,
 And joy and moan,
 Melt into one.

“There Past, Present, Future, shoot
 Triple blossoms from one root;
 Substances at base divided,
 In their summits are united;
 There the holy essence rolls,
 One through separated souls;
 And the sunny Æon sleeps
 Folding Nature in its deeps,
 And every fair and every good,
 Known in part, or known impure,
 To men below,

In their archetypes endure,
The race of gods,
Or those we erring own,
Are shadows flitting up and down
In the still abodes.
The circles of that sea are laws
Which publish and which hide the cause." ¹

At the basis of this conception lies the idea of the absolute unity of things. The love of this is a celestial love. "For, since the soul is different from God," says Plotinus in one of his accounts of the union of the soul with the One—the god he speaks of, "but is derived from him, she necessarily loves him, and when she is there she has a celestial love; but the love which she here possesses is common and vulgar. For in the intelligible world the celestial Venus reigns, but here the popular Venus, who is as it were meretricious." ²

Thus in explaining the nature of this love Emerson accepts the Plotinian or Neo-Platonic scheme rather than the Platonic, which ended in a vision of absolute beauty rather than of an absolute One. In Emerson love ends in a contemplation of the absolute oneness of all form, conditions, substances, and souls. Of

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 115-116.

² *Select Works*, 497.

this principle Plotinus writes: "But that is formless, and is even without intelligible form. For the nature of *the one* being generative of all things, is not any one of them. Neither therefore, is it a certain thing, nor a quality, nor a quantity, nor intellect, nor soul, nor that which is moved, nor again that which stands still. Nor is it in place, or in time; but is by itself uniform, or rather without form, being prior to all form, to motion and to permanency."¹

The couplet explaining how Past, Present, and Future shoot from one root is a reminiscence of the conception of the intelligible world which possesses all things in eternity. For intellect, which there reigns, as Plotinus says, "alone *is*, and *is* always, but is never *future*; for when the future arrives, it then also *is*; nor is it the *past*."²

One with Plotinus is the idea of the existence of all things in their archetypes in the world of pure intellect. He holds that all beings exist primarily in intellect. "Hence," he adds, "it is necessary that these things should be prior to the world, not as impressions from other things, but as archetypes, and

¹ *Select Works*, 478.

² *Ibid.*, 263.

primary natures, and the essence of the intellect."¹ Inasmuch as in intellect all things are together without respect to time and place, they are conceived by Plotinus to be in eternity²—an idea which Emerson alludes to in his lines on Æon. Æon is the English name for *aión* (eternity).

Into Emerson's account the imagery of Plato's *Phædrus* also enters. In his narrative of the life of souls in the intelligible world Plato tells how all that are able revolve about pure ideas which they behold and whose life they drink in. "For those that are called immortal," he writes, "when they reach the summit, proceeding outside, stand on the back of heaven, and while they are stationed here, its revolution carries them round, and they behold the external regions of heaven."³ Alluding to this Emerson thus directs the lover to

"a region where the wheel
On which all beings ride
Visibly revolves."⁴

The nature of poetry permitted Emerson to

¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

² *Ibid.*, 186.

³ Bohn translation, I., 323.

⁴ *Complete Works*, IX., 115.



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give a highly concentrated account of love as conceived by Plato and the Platonists; it also permitted him to be impersonal. But in the more familiar form of the essay he was compelled to relate this theory to the ways of actual experience. Thus he came to write in his essay on *Friendship*: "My friends have come to me unsought. The great God gave them to me. By oldest right, by the divine affinity of virtue with itself, I find them, or rather not I, but the deity in me and in them derides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance, at which he usually connives, and now makes many one."¹

This account lacks the wealth of metaphysical statement that characterizes his poem, *Celestial Love*, but it shows how Emerson applied his metaphysics to his own life. Beneath the passage is the conception of the One which here unites his friends and himself into one mystic communion.

And yet he is true to the teaching of the Platonists in making that mystic experience of the One a solitary communion of the soul with the Absolute. This mystic union of many friends is not satisfactory. Hence he passes

¹ *Ibid.*, II., 194.

on to observe that the soul demands an absolutely solitary union with itself. "I cannot deny it, O friend," he continues, "that the vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity,—thee also, compared with whom all else is shadow. Thou are not Being, as Truth is, as Justice is—thou are not my soul, but a picture and effigy of that. Thou hast come to me lately, and already thou art seizing thy hat and cloak. Is it not that the soul puts forth friends as the trees puts forth leaves, and presently, by the germination of new buds, extrudes the old leaf? The law of nature is alternation for evermore. Each electrical state superinduces the opposite. The soul environs itself with friends that it may enter into a grander self-acquaintance or solitude; and it goes alone for a season that it may exalt its conversation or society. This method betrays itself along the whole history of our personal relations."¹

In such an account the necessity of solitary self-communion is emphatic. It recalls the ideal of friendship which Iamblichus states characterized the Pythagoreans; "for they perpetually exhorted each other, not to divulge the God within them. Hence all the

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 197-198.

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endeavour of their friendship, both in deeds and words, was directed to a certain divine mixture, to a union with divinity, and to a communion with intellect and a divine soul.”¹

And this self-communion is for the purpose of catching a vision of eternal things in some great moment. “In the great days, presentiments hover before me in the firmament. I ought, then, to dedicate myself to them. I go in that I may seize them, I go out that I may seize them. I fear only that I may lose them receding into the sky in which now they are only a patch of brighter light. Then, though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own. It would indeed give me a certain household joy to quit this lofty seeking, this spiritual astronomy or search for stars, and come down to warm sympathies with you; but then I know well I shall mourn always the vanishing of my mighty gods. It is true, next week I shall have languid moods, when I can well afford to occupy myself with foreign objects; then I shall regret the lost literature of your mind, and wish you were by my side again. But if you come, perhaps you will fill my mind only with new visions; not with

¹ *Life of Pythagoras*, 170.

yourself, but with your lustres, and I shall not be able any more to converse with you. So I will owe to my friends this evanescent intercourse. I will receive from them not what they have, but what they are. They shall give me that which properly they cannot give, but which emanates from them. But they shall not hold me by any relations less subtle and pure. We will meet as though we met not, and part as though we parted not.”¹ Acquiescence in the enjoyment of a moment of mystic vision thus takes precedence in Emerson over any desire to know the meaning of simple, human fellowship.

Thus far Emerson has explained friendship from his personal point of view and shown the relations in which his friends stand to him; but in his poem, *Etienne de la Boëce*, he states his duty to his friend. It is not to follow him, but to direct his mind to the worship of that inward Divine Presence to which his own life is dedicated:

“If I could,
 In severe or cordial mood,
 Lead you rightly to my altar,
 Where the wisest Muses falter,
 And worship that world-warming spark

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 215-216.

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Which dazzles me in midnight dark,
Equalizing small and large,
While the soul it doth surcharge,
Till the poor is wealthy grown,
And the hermit never alone—
The traveller and the road seem one
With the errand to be done—
That were a man's and lover's part,
That were Freedom's whitest chart."¹

In this passage the characterization of the "world-warming spark" identifies it with the Over-Soul. Without that identification the poem becomes unintelligible, especially the couplet—

"The traveller and the road seem one
With the errand to be done."

But interpreted in keeping with the doctrine of the Over-Soul the poem shows that in such a passage Emerson is expressing the Platonist's belief that in the union of soul with the One the knower and the thing known are one. As Plotinus expresses the notion, using the figure of light, he says of the mystic devotee that "he will be ignorant of the manner in which he sees it [the One]; but the vision filling the

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 82.

eyes with light, will prevent him from seeing anything else, since the light itself will be the object of his vision." ¹ It is an experience in which the traveler, or the soul of the devotee, the errand, or the vision of the One, and the road, or the light from the One, are one.

In finding the foundation of love and friendship in a mystical experience of such absorbing interest, Emerson has forsaken Plato, who does not ignore the personal, human elements in love. Many are the touches that let us into the human side of the *Dialogues* and show the tenderness of Socrates in his dealings with the favorite youths that crowded about to hear him question. The youthful Charmides and Lysis are types of such Athenian lads in whose personal graces and character the ugly-featured Socrates took warm delight. Nor, indeed, is adherence to the purely speculative side of the *Dialogues* destructive of human affection. Such speculation is based on beauty and beauty, however refined, in Plato is still a beauty that the soul sees in the loved one. The English poet, Spenser, has proved in his Calidore and Pastorella episode in *The Faerie Queene* how

¹ *On Suicide*, 101-102.



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sympathetic such a love as Plato taught can be. But by forsaking this beauty for a more metaphysical conception of unity Emerson failed to realize the best that Plato can teach.

And yet Emerson gives a statement of the theory of love which is based upon a passion for beauty. In his essay, *Love*, he explains "that high philosophy of Beauty which the ancient writers delighted in; for they said that the soul of man, embodied here on earth, went roaming up and down in quest of that other world of its own out of which it came into this, but was soon stupefied by the light of the natural sun, and unable to see any other objects than those of this world, which are but shadows of real things. Therefore, the Deity sends the glory of youth before the soul, that it may avail itself of beautiful bodies as aids to its recollection of the celestial good and fair; and the man beholding such a person in the female sex runs to her and finds the highest joy in contemplating the form, movement and intelligence of this person, because it suggests to him the presence of that which indeed is within the beauty, and the cause of the beauty." ¹

This is an abstract of what Plutarch had

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 181.



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said on love. In his dialogue, *Of Love*, he has a discussion arising out of the resemblance between the sun and the god of love. The passage runs: "Nevertheless, we must not therefore say they are all one. For neither are the soul and body the same, but distinct; as the sun is visible, but love is perceptible only by sense. And if it might not be thought too harsh a saying, a man might affirm that the sun and love act contrary to one another. For the sun diverts the understanding from things intelligible to sensible objects, alluring and fascinating the sight with the grace and splendor of his rays, and persuading us to search for other things, and even for truth itself, within and about itself, and nowhere else. And we appear to be passionately in love with the sun, because, as Euripides says,

He always on the earth displays
The glory of his burning rays,

for want of our knowledge of another life, or rather, through our forgetfulness of those things which love calls to our remembrance. For as, when we are newly awaked and come into a bright and dazzling light, we forget whatever appeared to the soul in our dreams; so the sun seems to stupefy our recollection

and impoison our understanding, when we change from the former life and enter this world, so that in our pleasure and admiration we forget all other considerations besides that of the present life. Though there indeed are the real substances proper for the contemplation of the soul; here, as in sleep, it embraces only dreams, and gazes in admiration and astonishment at what appears to it most beautiful and divine, while

Fallacious charming dreams about it fly—

it being persuaded that here everything is goodly and highly to be prized, unless it happens upon some divine and chaste love to be its physician and preserver. This love, entering through the body, becomes a guide to lead the soul from the world below to truth and the fields of truth, where full, pure, deceitless beauty dwells; and leading forth and guiding upward those that now after a long time are eager to embrace and live with such beauty, it stands by them, like a friendly mystagogue at the sacred ceremonies of initiation. But no sooner is the soul sent from thence again, but love is no longer able to make her approaches of herself, but by the body. And, therefore, as geomericians, when children are

not able of themselves to apprehend the intelligible idea of incorporeal and impassible substance, form and set before their eyes the tangible and visible imitation of spheres, cubes, and dodecahedrons; in like manner celestial love, having framed lovely mirrors to represent lovely objects—things mortal and passible to represent things divine, and sensible objects to represent those perceptible only to the eye of reason—shows them to us glittering in the forms, colors, and shape of youth in its prime, and first insensibly moves the memory inflamed by the sight of these objects.”¹

Emerson then continues with his account: “If, however, from too much conversing with material objects, the soul was gross, and misplaced its satisfaction in the body, it reaped nothing but sorrow; body being unable to fulfil the promise which beauty holds out; but if, accepting the hint of these visions and suggestions which beauty makes to his mind, the soul passes through the body and falls to admire strokes of character, and the lovers contemplate one another in their discourses and their actions, then they pass to the true palace of beauty, more and more inflame their

¹ *Morals*, IV., 294-295.

love of it, and by this love extinguishing the base affection, as the sun puts out fire by shining on the hearth, they become pure and hallowed.”¹

The basis of this is found in the continuation of Plutarch's account: “Whence it comes to pass that some, through the stupidity of their friends and acquaintances, endeavoring by force and against reason to extinguish that flame, have enjoyed nothing of true benefit thereby, but only either disquieted themselves with smoke and trouble, or else rushing headlong into obscure and irregular pleasures, obstinately cast themselves away. But as many as by sober and modest ratiocination have sincerely extinguished the raging heat of the fire, and left behind only warm and glowing heat in the soul—which causes no violent earthquake, as it was once called, rousing the seed and causing a gliding of atoms compressed by smoothness and titillation, but a wonderful and engendering diffusion, as in a blossoming and well-nourished plant, which opens the pores of obedience and affection—these, I say, in a short time passing by the bodies of those whom they love, penetrate more inwardly and fall to admire their man-

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 181-182.

ners and dispositions; and calling off their eyes from the body, they converse together and contemplate one another in their discourses and in their actions, provided there be but the least scrip or appearance of beauty in the understanding. If not, they let them go, and turn their affections upon others, like bees that will not fasten upon many plants and flowers, because they cannot gather honey from them. But where they find any foot-step, any emanation, any resemblance of a divinity, ravished with delight and admiration as they recall it to memory, they attract it to themselves, and are revived by striving to attain to what is truly amiable, happy and beloved by all mankind.

“ . . . This same subtle invention of love-sophistry in generous and noble souls causes a repercussion of the memory from objects that here appear and are called beautiful, to the beauty really divine, truly amiable and happy, and by all admired. But most people pursuing and taking hold of the fancied image of this beauty in boys and women, as it were seen in a mirror, reap nothing more assured and certain than a little pleasure mixed with pain. . . . But a generous and modest lover observes another method;

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for his contemplations reflect only on that beauty which is divine and perceptible by the understanding; but lighting upon the beauty of a visible body, and making use of it as a kind of organ of the memory, he embraces and loves, and by conversation augmenting his joy and satisfaction still more and more inflames his understanding. But neither do these lovers conversing with bodies rest satisfied in this world with a desire and admiration of this same light. . . . Whereas a lover truly chaste and amorous, being got to the true mansion of beauty, and there conversing with it as much as it is lawful for him to do, mounted upon wings of chaste desire, becomes pure and hallowed; and being initiated into sacred orders, continues dancing and sporting about this Deity, till returning again to the meadows of the Moon and Venus, and there laid asleep, he becomes ready for a new nativity.”¹

Emerson then concludes: “By conversation with that which is in itself excellent, magnanimous, lowly and just, the lover comes to a warmer love of these nobilities, and a quicker apprehension of them. Then he passes from loving them in one to loving

¹ *Morals*, IV., 295-296, 297-298.

them in all, and so is the one beautiful soul the only door through which he enters to the society of all true and pure souls. In the particular society of his mate he attains a clearer sight of any spot, any taint which her beauty has contracted from this world, and is able to point it out, and this with mutual joy that they are able, without offence, to indicate blemishes and hindrances in each other, and give to each all help and comfort in curing the same. And beholding in many souls the traits of divine beauty, and separating in each soul that which is divine from the taint which it has contracted in the world, the lover ascends to the highest beauty, to the love and knowledge of the Divinity, by steps on this ladder of created souls.”¹

This portion of his abstract is not from Plutarch. Plutarch had brought his discussion to a point “too high for the discourse which we have proposed to ourselves.” Emerson thus turns to Plato. In his *Banquet* Pláto explains: “Now to go, or to be led by another, along the right way of Love, is this: beginning from those beauties of lower rank, to proceed in a continual ascent, all the way proposing this highest beauty as the

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 182-183.

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end; and using the rest but as so many steps in the ascent; to proceed from one to two, from two to all beautiful bodies; from the beauty of bodies to that of souls; from the beauty of souls to that of arts; from the beauty of arts to that of discipline, until at length from the disciplines he arrives at that discipline which is the discipline of no other thing than of that supreme beauty; and thus finally attains to know what is the beautiful itself." ¹

"But this dream of love," observes Emerson, "though beautiful, is only one scene in our play." ² It is not a theory that he applied to his own experience. It merely strengthened his belief that love as it grows older must grow more impersonal. The affections and the personal relations must give way to this. "The soul may be trusted to the end. That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations, must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on forever." ³

The presence of the same theory of the beautiful is felt in Emerson's essay on *Beauty*.

¹ *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, III, 514.

² *Complete Works*, II., 183.

³ *Ibid.*, II., 188.

“Thus there is a climbing scale of culture, from the first agreeable sensation which a sparkling gem or a scarlet stain affords the eye, up through fair outlines and details of the landscape, features of the human face and form, signs and tokens of thought and character in manners, up to the ineffable mysteries of the intellect. Wherever we begin, thither our steps tend: an ascent from the joy of a horse in his trappings, up to the perception of Newton that the globe on which we ride is only a larger apple falling from a larger tree; up to the perception of Plato that globe and universe are rude and early expressions of an all-dissolving Unity—the first stair on the scale to the temple of the Mind.”¹

This is a reworking from the Neo-Platonic standpoint of the dialectic of beauty as Plato had stated it in his *Banquet*. Plato held to a way by which the soul mounts from the contemplation of the beauty of one object to the spiritual vision of absolute beauty. Plotinus, in his treatment of beauty, extends the path until it reaches the absolute One itself. “Just as those who penetrate into the holy retreats of sacred mysteries,” he explains, “are first purified, and then divest themselves of their

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 306.

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garments, until someone, by such a process, having dismissed everything foreign from the God, by himself alone, beholds the solitary principle of the universe, sincere, simple, and pure, from which all things depend, and to whose transcendent perfections the eyes of all intelligent natures are directed, as the proper cause of being, life, and intelligence.”¹

Yet Emerson shows more than a formal recognition of the doctrine of beauty as held by the Platonists. He was a true lover of beauty. His *Ode to Beauty* shows him not unworthy of a place with Keats, Milton and Spenser. But it is interesting to note that it is the æsthetic theory of Neo-Platonic writers rather than of Plato that influences his work. He felt without a doubt the difference between the speculations of Plotinus and of Proclus on beauty from those of Plato. Plato had very little to say of material beauty, but Plotinus developed an æsthetic theory that did full justice to it, even though his mysticism tended to make him reject the claims of things of the sensuous world; Proclus followed in his footsteps. Consequently, in these two writers Emerson found a body of theory ready

¹ *An Essay on the Beautiful*, 30-31.

made and he fashioned his own theories accordingly.

It was the intellectual quality of beauty that held Emerson's attention. "Beauty," he says, "is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world."¹ Thus in his final analysis of beauty he holds that "the new virtue which constitutes a thing beautiful is a certain cosmical quality, or a power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of a pitiful individuality. Every natural feature—sea, sky, rainbow, flowers, musical tone—has in it somewhat which is not private, but universal, speaks of that central benefit which is the soul of nature, and thereby is beautiful. And in chosen men and women I find somewhat in form, speech and manners, which is not of their person and family, but of a human, catholic and spiritual character, and we love them as the sky. They have a largeness of suggestion, their face and manners carry a certain grandeur, like time and justice."²

His poem, *Each and All*, turns upon this conception:

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 287.

² *Ibid.*, VI., 303-304.

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"All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone."¹

He works out the sentiment by explaining how a thing of beauty loses its charm when taken from its natural environment and instances the mute silence of the bird when brought home from the woodland, the lost beauty of the shells when removed from the beach, and the faded charm of the maiden when she becomes the lover's wife. Realizing these disappointments, he exclaims,

" 'I covet truth;
Beauty is unripe childhood's cheat;
I leave it behind with the games of youth.' " ²

But the true insight came when he looked about him at the beauty of the place.

"As I spoke, beneath my feet
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;
Over me soared the eternal sky,

¹ *Ibid.*, IX., 4.

² *Complete Works*, IX., 5.

Full of light and of deity;
 Again I saw, again I heard,
 The rolling river, the morning bird—
 Beauty through my senses stole;
 I yielded myself to the perfect whole.”¹

This conception of beauty is that which Proclus teaches. In his *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* he develops the idea at length. “What, then, someone may say, are not the sun and moon and each of the stars beautiful? But how is this possible? For each of these is assimilated to a partial animal. To this we reply, that each of these is beautiful when surveyed in conjunction with the whole and co-arranged with the whole; just as the eye and the chin are beautiful, in conjunction with the whole face, and while in the whole; but surveyed by themselves apart from the face, do not exhibit the beauty which is adapted to them. For in subsisting as a part and not as a whole, each when essentially divulsed from the whole, suffers a diminution of its own proper beauty. The perfect, therefore, and the beautiful are present with these which are parts, on account of the whole.”²

¹ *Ibid.*, IX., 5-6.

² I., 356.

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To the same idea of beauty Emerson refers in his definition of the comic. This quality in objects arises when the relation of the object to the whole is not observed, but the individual is purposely held up as a contrast to the whole. "Man through his access to Reason," Emerson maintains, "is capable of the perception of a whole and a part. Reason is the whole and whatsoever is not this is a part. The whole of Nature is agreeable to the whole of thought, or to the Reason; but separate any part of Nature and attempt to look at it as a whole by itself, and the feeling of the ridiculous begins."¹

By virtue of this cosmical quality of beauty each object in the universe becomes symbolical, or representative of the whole. Such is the statement that satisfies the intellect; but in the theory there is an imaginative element which Emerson develops to the full. The transformation of the individual into a thing of universal relationship is a stroke of the imagination. "There are no days in life," he confesses, "so memorable as those which vibrated to some stroke of the imagination."² Beauty thus takes on a fugitive nature. "This

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 158.

² *Ibid.*, VI., 304.

is the reason," he explains, "why beauty is still escaping out of all analysis. It is not yet possessed, it cannot be handled. Proclus says, 'It swims on the light of forms.' It is properly not in the form, but in the mind. It instantly deserts possession, and flies to an object in the horizon."¹

Here the sentiment is openly ascribed to Proclus, whose account of beauty in his *On the Theology of Plato* was a marked passage in Emerson's own copy. There Proclus had written: "And because it [beauty] bounds this triad, and covers as with a veil the ineffable union of the gods, swims as it were on the light of forms, causes intelligible light to shine forth and announces the occult nature of goodness, it is denominated splendid, lucid and manifest."²

With an eye keen for the sentence that states a truth chiming in with his own thought Emerson seizes the statement of Proclus and makes it the text of his *Ode to Beauty*, which may be regarded as the companion piece of *Each and All*. In the *Ode* Emerson sings of the enthralling attraction of a beauty which always escapes his grasp, eternal fugitive that

¹ *Ibid.*, VI., 303.

² I., 78.

it is. Though he knows not how it came about, he was a thrall of beauty from the first time he ever saw her.

“Lavish, lavish promiser,
 Nigh persuading gods to err!
 Guest of million painted forms,
 Which in turns thy glory warms!
 The frailest leaf, the mossy bark,
 The acorn’s cup, the rain drop’s arc,
 The swinging spider’s silver line,
 The ruby of the drop of wine,
 The shining pebble of the pond,
 Thou inscribest with a bond,
 In thy momentary play,
 Would bankrupt nature to repay.

“Thee gliding through the sea of form,
 Like the lightning through the storm,
 Somewhat not to be possessed,
 Somewhat not to be caressed,
 No feet so fleet could ever find,
 No perfect form could ever bind.
 Thou eternal fugitive,
 Hovering over all that live,
 Quick and skilful to inspire
 Sweet, extravagant desire,
 Starry space and lily-bell
 Filling with thy roscate smell,

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Will not give the lips to taste
Of the nectar which thou hast." ¹

Emerson also recognizes the spiritual side of beauty which he had found stated in the Platonists. "The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will. Beauty is the mark God sets upon Virtue. Every natural action is graceful. Every heroic act is also decent, and causes the place and the bystanders to shine." ²

Plutarch, in his dialogue, *Of Love*, has made one of his characters observe, "But some say that beauty is the flower of virtue." ³ Emerson had noted the sentiment, for he repeats it in his essay, *Love*, when he says, "The ancients called beauty the flowering of virtue." ⁴

But Emerson develops the idea in a characteristic way. Not only is beauty the outward

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 87-90.

² *Ibid.*, I., 19-20.

³ *Morals*, IV., 300.

⁴ *Complete Works*, II., 179.

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index in man of spiritual excellence, as Platonism taught, but nature herself envelops the beautiful act with the beauty of her own environment. Thus Emerson asks, "When a noble act is done—perchance in a scene of great natural beauty; when Leonidas and his three hundred martyrs consume one day in dying, and the sun and moon come each and look at them once in the steep defile of Thermopylæ; when Arnold Winkelried, in the high Alps, under the shadow of the avalanche, gathers in his side a sheaf of Austrian spears to break the line for his comrades—are not these heroes entitled to add the beauty of the scene to the beauty of the deed? . . . Ever does natural beauty steal in like air, and envelope great actions." ¹

As a final consideration of the meaning of beauty Emerson maintains with the Platonists the unity of beauty, truth and goodness. They form a trinity in which each is but a phase of the divine presence. Thus he sums up his account of beauty with the words: "Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth and goodness, and beauty,

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 20-21.

are but different faces of the same All.”¹

Such identification is characteristic of Proclus's manner of treating triads and monads. Gathering up what Plato had said of the relation of beauty and goodness and wisdom, he thus philosophizes: “But what sufficient argument of division does Socrates afford us in the *Phædrus*, concerning these intelligible triads? And how from what is delivered by him may we recur to the conception of the hypostasis of the most principal gods? Socrates, therefore, in that dialogue, being inspired by the nymphs celebrates every thing divine as beautiful, wise and good, and says that by these the soul is nourished. But if everything divine is a thing of this kind, this is the case with the intelligible by a much greater priority. And all these are everywhere, but in the first triad, the good principally subsists; in the second the wise; and in the third the beautiful. For in this there is the most beautiful of intelligibles. But in the second triad truth and the first intelligence subsist.”²

Beauty is of such importance to Emerson that he readily adopts the Pythagorean notion

¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

² *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 204.

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of the world as *κόσμος* in his discussion of the uses of nature. According to Plutarch, "Pythagoras was the first philosopher that gave the name of *κόσμος* to the world from the order and beauty of it; for so the word signifies."¹ Following such a definition Emerson finds in the love of natural objects one of the uses, though not the final use, in which nature serves man. Thus he opens the discussion of beauty in *Nature* with the statement—"The ancient Greeks called the world *κόσμος*, beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion and grouping."²

Emerson's reading in the Platonists, then, was a great stimulus to his appreciation of beauty. Their conception of a gradation of beauty provided him with a critical scheme to value beauty in its primary manifestation and up through the moral and intellectual worlds into the realm of pure imagination. The teaching of Proclus of the cosmical

¹ *Morals*, III., 132.

² *Complete Works*, I., 15.



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nature of beauty, by which the individual is related to the universal scheme of things, appealed most strongly to Emerson. It satisfied a mind that loved to lose itself in the thought of universals and it enabled him to appreciate the fugitive character of beauty arising out of its cosmical quality. Beauty is thus not identified with form, symmetry, or color, but is a liveliness quite distinct from these. In catching this fascinating quality of beauty Emerson gets nearer to the spirit of Platonism than when he develops his ideal of love.

CHAPTER V

ART

THE question of art is closely associated in Emerson with the larger question of nature. In his introduction to *Nature* he includes the term *art* under his main topic. "*Nature*, in the common sense," so his definition runs, "refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result."¹ Later in life, he attended to this matter of art with a fullness of treatment in keeping with the importance of the subject; but throughout his art criticism there is a close connection between his theories of nature and those of art.

Art, so Emerson conceives its general im-

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 5.

port, is one way in which the Universal Mind reveals itself in the activities of the individual. "I hasten to state," his account runs, "the principle which prescribes, through different means, its firm law to the useful and the beautiful arts. The law is this. The universal soul is the alone creator of the useful and the beautiful; therefore, to make anything useful or beautiful, the individual must be submitted to the universal mind."¹ In both the useful and the fine arts, nature is a representative of the universal mind. "In the first place," he proceeds, "let us consider this in reference to the useful arts. Here the omnipotent agent is Nature; all human acts are satellites to her orb. Nature is the representative of the universal mind, and the law becomes this—that Art must be a complement to Nature, strictly subsidiary."² In applying the idea to the fine arts he adds, "Nature paints the best part of the picture, carves the best part of the statue, builds the best part of the house, and speaks the best part of the oration."³ As regards the spiritual side of a work of art, "the parts must be subordinate

Or see
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¹ *Ibid.*, VII., 40.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

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to Ideal Nature, and everything individual abstracted, so that it shall be the production of the universal soul." ¹ He thus concludes: "There is but one Reason. The mind that made the world is not one mind, but *the* mind. And every work of art is a more or less pure manifestation of the same." ²

The doctrine of Universal Mind is writ large on such a theory: and that doctrine Emerson had appropriated from Platonism. The subserviency of nature to this mind, however, and the part that it and the universal mind play in human art arose out of a suggestion which Emerson found in Cudworth's essay on plastic nature which he indexed under "Art" in his own copy of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*. This plastic nature, Cudworth explains, is "to be conceived as art acting not from without and at a distance, but immediately upon the thing itself which is formed by it." ³ But this plastic nature in its operations is subordinate to the divine mind. Accordingly he states: "Nature is not the Deity itself, but a thing very remote from it, and far below it, so

¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

² *Ibid.*, 50-51.

³ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 235.

neither is it the divine art, as it is in itself pure and abstract, but concrete and embodied only; for the divine art considered in itself is nothing but knowledge, understanding, or wisdom in the mind of God."¹ "Nature is not master of that consummate art and wisdom, according to which it acts, but only a servant to it, and a drudging executioner of the dictates of it."² Quoting Plotinus, from whom the theory is drawn, he says, "That which is called nature is the offspring of a higher soul, which hath a more powerful life in it."³ Now by substituting his own name for God, namely, Universal Mind, Emerson was able to use Cudworth's account as the basis of his essay, *Art*.

Further evidence of his dependence upon Cudworth is to be found in his preliminary definition of art. "Relatively to themselves," he says, "the bee, the bird, the beaver, have no art; for what they do they do instinctively; but relatively to the Supreme Being, they have. And the same is true of all unconscious action: relatively to the doer, it is instinct; relatively to the First Cause, it is Art.

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 237-238.

² *Ibid.*, I., 239.

³ *Ibid.*, I., 256.

In this sense, recognizing the Spirit which informs Nature, Plato rightly said, 'Those things, which are said to be done by Nature are indeed done by Divine Art.' Art, universally, is the spirit creative. It was defined by Aristotle, 'The reason of the thing, without the matter.'"¹

In Cudworth's account both these quotations are found and in Emerson's copy both are marked. "Wherefore when art is said to imitate nature," writes Cudworth, "the meaning thereof is, that imperfect human art imitates that perfect art of nature, which is really no other than the divine art itself; as before Aristotle, Plato had declared in his Sophist, in these words: '. . . Those things which are said to be done by Nature, are indeed done by divine art.'"² "Art is defined by Aristotle to be '. . . the reason of the thing without matter.'"³ It is also to be recalled that the motto from Plotinus prefixed to the first edition of *Nature* came from this portion of Cudworth where plastic nature is discussed.

So imbued is Emerson with the doctrine of

¹ *Complete Works*, VII., 39.

² *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 237.

³ *Ibid.*, I., 238.

Universal Mind as the creator in all art that he uses it to explain certain phenomena in æsthetics. The pleasure aroused by a work of art seems to arise from our recognizing in it the mind that formed nature again in active operation.¹ The same principle also explains the moral grandeur of works of art; they come from absolute mind whose nature is goodness as well as truth.² The analogies existing in all arts likewise find an explanation in the reappearance of one mind working to many temporal ends in many materials.³ The necessity, too, reigning in the world of art is one of the possible forms in the Divine mind discovered and executed by the artist.⁴

It has already been pointed out how the doctrine of Universal Mind changes into that of the Over-Soul. Both mean the same thing in Emerson. In the Over-Soul he lays emphasis upon the relation of the divine power to the human soul; the former stands over the latter and guides its activities, just as in the scheme of the Platonists the One is above Intellect and Intellect above Soul, each princi-

¹ *Complete Works*, VII., 51.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.


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ple drawing its life from that immediately above it in power. By applying this conception to the relation of the divine mind to the artist Emerson explains the manner of creation in art:

“Know’st thou what wove yon wood-bird’s nest
Of leaves, and feathers from her breast?
Or how the fish outbuilt her shell,
Painting with morn each annual cell?
Or how the sacred pine-tree adds
To her old leaves new myriads?
Such and so grew these holy piles
Whilst love and terror laid the tiles.
Earth proudly wears the Parthenon
As the best gem upon her zone,
And Morning opes with haste her lids
To gaze upon the Pyramids;
O’er England’s abbeys bends the sky,
As on its friends, with kindred eye.

These temples grew as grows the grass;
Art might obey, but not surpass.
The passive Master lent his hand
To the vast soul that o’er him planned;
And the same power that reared the shrine
Bestrode the tribes that knelt within.”¹

¹ *Ibid.*, IX., 7-8.



Among the arts poetry receives the fullest share of Emerson's attention. In the ideal poet he found the complete man whose advent he was ever expecting; in him he looked to find the embodiment under the form of beauty of all that he had come to learn concerning nature and the soul: in fact the poet and the philosopher were to be one.

At first sight this fusion of poetry and philosophy seems to preclude the influence of Platonism as an important factor in such a result. Plato had banished the poets from his commonwealth and had analyzed their art as an imitation of an imitation and not an imitation of reality. He had thus come to place the poet just a little above a mechanic or farmer. But Plotinus had corrected the error. "If one condemns the arts," he says, "because they create by way of imitation of nature, first we must observe that natural things themselves are an imitation of something further [viz., of underlying reasons or ideas], and next we must bear in mind that the arts do not simply imitate the visible, but go back to the reasons from which nature comes; and, further, that they create much out of themselves, and add to that which is

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defective, as being themselves in possession of beauty; since Pheidias did not create his Zeus after any perceived pattern, but made him such as he would be if Zeus deigned to appear to mortal eyes.”¹

Through such reasoning Plotinus brought Platonism back to a fuller realization of the plastic character of its own thought. Plato had appealed to this Greek way of looking at things of the spirit in his account of creation; in his *Timæus* the Creator sets about his work as an artist and fashions the world after an eternal pattern of ideal or intellectual beauty; hence the dependence of this world of sense as an image on the world of true intelligible substance. But he had never applied the idea to art. Plotinus, however, did. He turned the tide of imitation into a resourceful stream of pure creation. Art, then, as a creative idea in the soul of the artist had a beauty surpassing that of the works proceeding from it; and just as the Creator in the *Timæus* was superior to his work, or the universe, so the human artist rises above his work and lives in an essentially ideal world of his own.

¹ Quoted in Bernard Bosanquet, *A History of Æsthetic*, 113-114.

In Emerson this conception of art is found in snatches of æsthetic theory. "The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for the new creation."¹ "The creation of beauty is Art."² "Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works."³ "The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model."⁴ York Minster and St. Peter's are imitations, "faint copies of an invisible archtype."⁵ In such statements art is conceived as a creative power in the artist, and not a mere imitation lacking reality.

But it was Proclus that showed Emerson how the breach between poetry and philosophy opened by Plato's criticism could be closed. Although Plotinus had justified the artist as a creative agent, he had not attempted to identify him with the philosopher. But this Proclus did in an account of poetry which contains, in the words of Thomas Taylor, who

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 23.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, II., 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I., 68.




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includes the passage in his notes to Plato's *Republic*, "a most accurate and scientific division of poetry, and perfectly reconciles the prince of philosophers with the first of poets."¹ This reconciliation is brought about by summarily paralleling the activities of the soul with the functions of the various kinds of poetry.

"There are three lives in the soul," says Proclus, "of which the best and most perfect is that according to which it is conjoined with the Gods, and lives a life most allied, and through the highest similitude united to them; no longer subsisting from itself, but from them, running under its own intellect, exciting the ineffable impressions of *the one* which it contains, and connecting like with like, its own light with that of the Gods, and that which is most uniform in its own essence and life, with *the one* which is above all essence and life. That which is second to this in dignity and power, has a middle arrangement in the middle of the soul, according to which indeed it is converted to itself, descending from a divinely inspired life; and placing intellect and science as the principles of its energy, it

¹ *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, I, 438, note.



evolves the multitude of its reasons, surveys the all-various mutations of forms, collects into sameness intellect, and that which is the object of intellect, and expresses in images an intellectual and intelligible essence. The third life of the soul is that which accords with its inferior powers, and energizes together with them, employing phantasies and irrational senses, and being entirely filled with things of a subordinate nature.


“As there are therefore these three forms of life in souls, the poetical division also supernally proceeds together with the multiform lives of the soul, and is diversified into first, middle, and last genera of energy. For, of poetry also, one kind has the highest subsistence, is full of divine goods, and establishes the soul in the causes themselves of things, according to a certain ineffable union, leading that which is filled, into sameness with its replenishing source; the former immaterially subjecting itself to illumination, but the latter being excited to a communication of light; thus according to the Oracle, ‘perfecting works, by mingling the rivers of incorruptible fire.’ It also produces one divine bond and a unifying mixture of that which is participated and the participant, establishing the



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whole of that which is subordinate in that which is more excellent, and preparing that which is more divine alone to energize, the inferior nature being withdrawn, and concealing its own idiom in that which is superior. This then, in short, is a mania better than temperance, and is distinguished by a divine characteristic. And as every different kind of poetry subsists according to a different hyperaxis, or summit of divine essence, so this fills the soul energizing from divine inspiration, with symmetry; and hence it adorns its last energies with measures and rhythms. As therefore we say that prophetic fury subsists according to truth, and the amatory according to beauty, in the like manner, we say, that the poetic mania is defined according to divine symmetry.

“The second kind of poetry which is subordinate to the first and divinely inspired species, and which has a middle subsistence in the soul, is allotted its essence according to a scientific and intellectual habit. Hence it knows the essence of things and loves to contemplate beautiful works and reasonings, and leads forth everything into a measured and rhythmical interpretation. For you will find many progeny of good poets to be of this kind,



emulous of those that are truly wise, full of admonition, the best counsels, and intellectual symmetry. It likewise extends the communication of prudence and every other virtue to those of a naturally good disposition, and affords a reminiscence of the periods of the soul, of its eternal reasons, and various powers.

“The third species of poetry subsequent to these, is mingled with opinions and phantasies, receives its completion through imitation, and is said to be, and is nothing else than imitative poetry. At one time, it alone uses assimilation, and at another time defends apparent and not real assimilation. It considerably raises very moderate passions, astonishes the hearers; together with appropriate appellations and words, mutations of harmonies and varieties of rhythms, changes the dispositions of souls; and indicates the nature of things not such as they are, but such as they appear to the many; being a certain adumbration, and not an accurate knowledge of things. It also establishes as its end the delight of the hearers; and particularly looks to the passive part of the soul, which is naturally adapted to rejoice and be affected. But of this species of poetry, as we have said, one division is *assimilative*, which is extended to

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rectitude of imitation, but the other is *phantastic*, and affords apparent imitation alone.”¹

Proclus then shows that Plato mentions these kinds of poetry and that Homer was skilled in them all, especially the enthusiastic variety. He concludes by stating that the reason why Plato was so severe on Homer was that in Plato's time poetry was overestimated and philosophy undervalued.² In Proclus, then, is found the highest justification of poetry and its intimate alliance with the principles of Platonism. Corresponding to the three principles are three kinds of poetry.

Emerson had marked this dissertation of Proclus' in his own copy. It gave an account of poetry quite in keeping with his sentiments. And although he does not follow Proclus in the details of his comparison, Emerson is one with him in correlating the method of poetry with that of philosophy.

Emerson places the poet on an equal with the man of action and the man of knowledge. The three form a trinity of persons distinct yet equal in power. "For the Universe," he writes, "has three children, born at one time,

¹ Quoted in *The Works of Plato*, translated by Thomas Taylor, I., 438, note.

² *Ibid.*, note, 439 et sq.

which reappear under different names in every system of thought, whether they be called cause, operation and effect; or, more poetically, Jove, Pluto, Neptune; or, theologically, the Father, the Spirit and the Son; but which we will call here the Knower, the Doer and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty. These three are equal. Each is that which he is, essentially, so that he cannot be surmounted or analyzed, and each of these three has the power of the others latent in him and his own, patent.”¹

This basic principle which defines the relation of the poet to a general scheme of things is an amplification of the familiar Platonic doctrine of the trinity of the beautiful, the good, and the true. Emerson's treatment of it here is reminiscent of a discussion in Cudworth. In his treatment of the pagan deities Cudworth points out how one group of their gods makes up “one orderly and harmonious system of the whole; one of those gods ruling only in the heavens, another in the sea, and another in the earth and hell; one being the god or goddess of learning and wisdom, another of

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 6-7.

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speech and eloquence, another of justice and political order.”¹ The reference in the first group is to Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto, who Cudworth adds, “were not three really distinct substantial beings, but only so many several names for one supreme God.”² From the second group in Cudworth, Emerson got his series, the Knower, the Sayer, and the Doer. And the identification of the three with the primary conception of love of truth, love of beauty, and love of good, shows how the principles of Platonism were the guiding factors in Emerson’s thinking.

To justify the poet as the representative sayer, or namer of things, Emerson explains the poet’s insight into the symbolical nature of the universe. The materials of his craft are symbols. “Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value; as the carpenter’s stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze. ‘Things more excellent than every image,’ says Jamblichus, ‘are expressed through images.’ Things admit of being used as sym-

¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I, 364.

² *Ibid.*, II., 223.

bols because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part.”¹

This conception of the poet is a growth out of Emerson's familiar way of looking at nature as a symbol, which truth he had learned in his study of Platonism. The quotation of Iamblichus, too, points to the character of the idea; it is a sentiment which Iamblichus uses in explaining the true nature of a sacred institution, which he says “imitates both the intelligible and celestial order of the Gods; and contains the eternal measures of beings, and those admirable signatures which are sent hither from the Demiurgus and father of wholes, by which things of an ineffable nature are unfolded into light through arcane symbols, things formless are vanquished by forms, things more excellent than every image are expressed through images. . . .”²

The material of the poet's craft being symbols, the poet is the man who knows how to articulate them. All men, whether consciously or not, love symbols and use them but “the poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 13.

² *On the Mysteries*, 79-80.

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every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of the thought, the accidentality and the fugacity of the symbol. As the eyes of Lynceus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For through that better perception he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. / . . . He uses forms according to the life and not according to the form. This is true science. . . . By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary." ¹

In such a theory Platonism plays its part by giving the idea of flux, which Emerson inter-

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 20-21.

prets in characteristic wise as an ascension. His theory also recalls Plato's discussion of language in the *Cratylus*. Here is found the mention of an original legislator who is represented as naming things, some according to the flux of things, and others according to stability. The majority of words seem to indicate flux, says Plato, but there are other names "from which," he adds, "one would imagine, that the founder of names did not indicate things going on and borne along, but such as have an abiding."¹ And finally in identifying poetry with true science, Emerson presents an ideal of the poet very like that ideal which Porphyry says Plotinus represented. "Plotinus likewise applied himself," Porphyry writes, "to the canons concerning the stars, but not according to a very mathematical mode. That is, we may presume, he very little regarded the calculation of eclipses, or measuring the distance of the sun and moon from the earth, or determining the magnitudes and velocities of the planets. For he considered employments of this kind, as more the province of the mathematician, than of the profound and intellectual philosopher. The mathematical sciences are indeed the proper

¹ Bohn translation, III., 388.

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means of acquiring wisdom, but they ought never to be considered as its *end*. They are the bridge, as it were, between sense and intellect, by which we may safely pass through the night of oblivion, over the dark and stormy ocean of matter, to the lucid regions of the intelligible world. And he who is desirous of returning to his true country, will speedily pass over this bridge without making any needless delays in his passage.”¹

Such a conception agrees well with Emerson's encomium of the poet. “The poet alone knows astronomy, chemistry, vegetation and animation, for he does not stop at these facts, but employs them as signs. He knows why the plain or meadow of space was strown with flowers we call suns and moons and stars; why the great deep is adorned with animals, with men, and gods; for in every word he speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought.”²

In referring to Lyncæus to explain the acuteness of the poet's spiritual vision Emerson shows indebtedness to Plotinus. In explaining the relation of each thing in the intelligible world to the whole Plotinus writes:

¹ *Select Works*, Introduction, liii-liv. Cf. *Complete Works*, III., 298, note to p. 21.

² *Complete Works*, III., 21.

“For it appears indeed as a part; but by him whose sight is acute, it will be seen as a whole; viz., by him whose sight resembles that which Lynceus is said to have possessed, and which penetrated the interior parts of the earth; the fable obscurely indicating the acuteness of the vision of supernal eyes.”¹ Recollecting this passage, which he had marked in his own copy, Emerson writes: “As the eyes of Lyncæus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession.”²

This application to the poet of what the Platonists had said about the philosopher is illustrated in Emerson's further appropriations from his reading. “Our best definition of poetry,” he writes, “is one of the oldest sentences, and claims to come down to us from the Chaldean Zoroaster, who wrote it thus: ‘Poets are standing transporters, whose employment consist in speaking to the Father and to matter; in producing apparent imitations of unapparent natures, and inscribing things unapparent in the apparent fabrication of the world;’ in other words, the world

¹ *Select Works*, Introduction, lxxxi.

² *Complete Works*, III., 20.



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exists for thought; it is to make appear things which hide; mountains, crystals, animals, are seen: that which makes them is not seen: these, then, are 'apparent copies of unapparent natures.'"¹

This quotation, which Emerson includes in a list of generalizations that "all have a kind of filial retrospect to Plato and the Greeks,"² is from Taylor's *Collection of Chaldean Oracles*, where connection of the oracle with the poets is in no wise intimated. In the original form it reads: "Rulers who understand the intelligible works of the Father. These he spreads like a veil over sensible works and bodies. They are standing transporters, whose employment consists in speaking to the Father and to matter; in producing apparent imitations of unapparent natures; and in inscribing things unapparent in the apparent fabrication of the world."³

Poetry and philosophy, then, are one; but with a difference. "Whilst the poet animates nature with his own thoughts," Emerson observes in distinguishing them, "he differs

¹ *Ibid.*, VIII., 19.

² *Ibid.*, V., 241.

³ *Classical Journal*, XVII., 250.

from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. . . . The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both.”¹

In support of such a theory Emerson appeals to the identity in charm of a definition in philosophy and a work of art, such as Sophocles' *Antigone*.² “I will not now consider,” he writes, “how much this makes the charm of algebra and the mathematics, which also have their tropes, but it is felt in every definition: as . . . when Plato defines a *line* to be a flowing point; or *figure* to be a bound of solid. . . . When Socrates, in *Charmides*, tells us that the soul is cured of its maladies by certain incantations, and that these incantations are beautiful reasons, from which temperance is generated in souls; when Plato calls the world an animal, and *Timæus* affirms that the plants also are animals; or affirms a man to be a heavenly tree, growing with his root, which is his head, upward; . . . when *Orpheus* speaks of hoariness

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 55.

² *Ibid.*

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as 'that white flower which marks extreme old age'; when Proclus calls the universe the statue of the intellect. . . ."¹

This use of symbols in poetry as well as philosophy, has a certain power of exhilaration for all men. "Poets are thus liberating Gods."² In thus characterizing them Emerson is alluding to one of the technical terms common in the writings of the Platonists. In the Platonists the term is "liberated gods," and refers to an order of gods, "who," so Taylor informs us, "are called *supercelestial*, as being immediately above the mundane gods."³ They are also the "azonic" gods of which Emerson elsewhere speaks.⁴

In describing the character of poetic inspiration Emerson makes a further identification of the poet with the philosopher. "It is a secret which every intellectual man quickly learns," Emerson explains, "that beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect he is capable of a new energy (as of an intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things; that beside his

¹ *Complete Works*, III., 30-31.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ Proclus, *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato*, II., 12, note 7.

⁴ *Complete Works*, VII., 203.

privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.”¹

In thus speaking, Emerson is giving his version of the way in which the Platonists maintain the intellect perceives the One in ecstasy. Plotinus writes of this experience: “Hence it is requisite, that the soul of him who ascends to *the good* should then become intellect, and that he should commit his soul to, and establish it in intellect, in order, that what intellect sees, his soul may vigilantly receive, and may through intellect survey *the one*; not employing any one of the senses, nor receiving anything from them, but with a pure intellect, and with the summit [and as it were, flower] of intellect, beholding that which is most pure.”² And again Plotinus writes: “Intellect possesses a two fold power; one, by which it perceives intellectually, and beholds the form which it contains; but the other by

¹ *Ibid.*, III., 26-27.

² *Select Works*, 476-477.

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which it sees things beyond itself by a certain intuition and reception. . . . And the former, indeed, is the vision of intellect replete with wisdom; but the latter, of intellect inflamed with love. For when it becomes insane through being intoxicated with nectar, then it also becomes amatory."¹ In Emerson the same or similar expressions occur. "The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, 'with the flower of the mind;' not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar."²

And just as Emerson found in Zoroaster's Oracles a definition for poetry, so he is able to make him explain the nature of the poet's ecstasy. "It is remarkable," he observes, "that we have, out of the deeps of antiquity in the oracles ascribed to the half fabulous Zoroaster, a statement of this fact which every lover and seeker of truth will recognize. 'It is not proper,' said Zoroaster, 'to understand

¹ *On Suicide*, 98.

² *Complete Works*, III., 27.

the Intelligible with vehemence, but if you incline your mind, you will apprehend it: not too earnestly, but bringing a pure and inquiring eye. You will not understand it as when understanding some particular thing, but with the flower of the mind. Things divine are not attainable by mortals who understand sensual things, but only the light-armed arrive at the summit.”¹

In Taylor's *Collection of Chaldean Oracles* this oracle is given in three separate extracts. (1) “You will not apprehend it by an intellectual energy, as when understanding some particular thing.” (2) “It is not proper to understand that intelligible with vehemence, but with the extended flame of an extended intellect; a flame which measures all things, except that intelligible. But it is requisite to understand this. For if you incline your mind, you will understand it though not vehemently. It becomes you therefore, bringing with you the pure convertible eye of your soul, to extend the void intellect to the intelligible that you may learn its nature, because it has a subsistence above intellect.”² In a note to this is added: “This is spoken of a divine

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 213-214.

² *Classical Journal*, XVI., 133.

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intelligible which is only to be apprehended by the flower of intellect, or, in other words, the unity of the soul.”¹ (3) Again the Oracles read: “Things divine cannot be obtained by those whose intellectual eye is directed to body; but those only can arrive at the possession of them, who, stript of their garments, hasten to the summit.”² The assembling of this material and the pruning of the verbiage show how carefully Emerson had read the passages.

To explain the nature of inspiration Emerson draws on other quotations from his favorite books. As to the conditions of inspiration, he refers to Plato. “Plato, in his seventh epistle,” he writes, “notes that the perception is only accomplished by long familiarity with the objects of intellect, and a life according to the things themselves. ‘Then a light, as is leaping from a fire, will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and will then itself nourish itself.’”³ And again he quotes from Plato, this time from the *Phædrus*, to the effect that “The man who is his own mas-

¹ *Ibid.*, note 2.

² *Ibid.*, XVII., 258.

³ *Complete Works*, VIII., 274. Cf. Bohn translation of Plato, IV., 524, and *Select Works of Plotinus*, Introduction, lix, note.

ter knocks in vain at the doors of poetry.”¹

It is quite evident, then, that in his definition of poetry, of its materials, and of its inspiration, Emerson is identifying the poet with the philosopher. A further parallel between the two is seen in Emerson's conception of true poetic rhymes.

By rhymes Emerson does not mean the chime of word with word but rather the balance of antagonistic elements composing the universe. Impressed with it in his view of the world, he makes it one of the duties of the poet to attend to such balancings in nature. Thus he has the pine tree in *Woodnotes* sing of these.² Merlin, a name for his ideal poet, attends to recording such rhymes.³ Seyd, another name for the same poet, had an ear attuned to them.⁴ And in his critical discussion of rhyme Emerson points out how true poetic rhyme rises to this as its highest form. “Of course rhyme soars and refines with the growth of mind. The boy liked the drum, the people liked an overpowering jewsharp tune. Later they like to transfer that rhyme to life, and to detect a melody as prompt and perfect in their

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 274.

² *Ibid.*, IX., 54.

³ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

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daily affairs. Omen and coincidence show the rhythmical structure of man; hence the taste for signs, sortilege, prophecy and fulfilment, anniversaries, etc. By and by, when they apprehend real rhymes, namely, the correspondence of parts in 'Nature—acid and alkali, body and mind, man and maid, character and history, action and reaction—they do not longer value rattles and ding-dongs, or barbaric word-jingle. Astronomy, Botany, Chemistry, Hydraulics and the elemental forces have their own periods and returns, their own grand strains of harmony not less exact, up to the primeval apothegm that 'there is nothing on earth which is not in the heavens in a heavenly form, and nothing in the heavens which is not on the earth in an earthly form.' They furnish the poet with grander pairs and alternations, and will require an equal expansion in his metres." ¹

This notion is the Pythagorean one of the dualism underlying nature which is a harmony of antagonistic elements. The Platonists incorporated it into their thought and Emerson uses it as the basic principle of his doctrine of Compensation. Its source in the Platonists is also indicated in Emerson's quo-

¹ *Ibid.*, VIII., 48-49.

tation of "the primeval apothegm." This is an adaptation of the Smaragdine Table "which is of such great authority with the alchemists," says Taylor, "and which whether originally written or not by Hermes Trismegistus, is doubtless of great antiquity."¹ Emerson's quotation is not an exact but a free rendering of its opening words: "It is true without a lie, certain, and most true, that what is beneath is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is beneath, for the purpose of accomplishing the miracle of one thing."² The doctrine of Platonism which this expresses is given by Plotinus who holds that all things pre-exist ideally in the intelligible world. By blending the notion of parallelism with that of antagonism Emerson comes to view the relation of the world of sense to the world of pure intellect as one of the great rhymes to which the poet will attend.

After this analysis of Emerson's canons of art it appears that in this realm he expected to find the fruition of his deepest desires as a philosopher. In the artist he sees the work-

¹ Quoted in Proclus, *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 194, note.

² *Ibid*

ing of the Universal Mind and in the poet, the supreme artist, he finds one who is working with the materials and in the manner of the inquiring spirit of a philosopher. "Of course," he fails not to add, "when we describe man as poet, and credit him with the triumphs of the art, we speak of the potential or ideal man—not found now in any one person. You must go through a city or a nation, and find one faculty here, one there, to build the true poet withal. Yet all men know the portrait when it is drawn, and it is part of religion to believe its possible incarnation. He is the healthy, the wise, the fundamental, the manly man, seer of the secret; against all the appearance he sees and reports the truth, namely, that the soul generates matter. And poetry is the only verity—the expression of a sound mind speaking after the ideal, and not after the apparent."¹

It is the poet-philosopher to whom Emerson looks for the long promised ideal that Nature has been striving to perfect. As approximations to that ideal, Emerson alludes to a few men among whom Plato and Plotinus are found. Thus Nature in her song says:

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 26-27.

“Twice I have moulded an image,
And thrice outstretched my hand,
Made one of day and one of night
And one of the salt sea-sand.

“One in Judæan manger,
And one by Avon stream,
One ¹ over against the mouths of Nile,
And one ² in the Academe.” ³

But Emerson's ideal is manifestly unfair to art, for it expects art to do more than it ought. It lacks balance and sanity of judgment and shows an incapacity to do justice to the sensuous as well as the spiritual side of the subject. No better indication of the glaring defects of Emerson's appreciative criticism can be found than in his statement that “perhaps Homer and Milton will be tin pans yet. Better not to be easily pleased. The poet should rejoice if he has taught us to despise his song; if he has so moved us as to lift us—to open the eye of the intellect to see farther and better.” ⁴ This extreme is matched by his high estimate of Proclus. Speaking of his intellectual

¹ Plotinus.

² Plato.

³ *Complete Works*, IX., 246.

⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII., 68.



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strength, Emerson told his auditors in his Harvard course on philosophy, "What literature should be, he is."¹ His identification of the poet with the philosopher thus ends in the banishment of the poet. In this respect Emerson forsakes Plotinus and goes over to Plato, although his method of reasoning is not that employed by Plato. It is due to the fact that Emerson did not check in himself the strong ascetic tendency fostered by reading in the philosophy of Plotinus; which tendency Plotinus himself had resisted in his valuation of sensuous beauty.

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, LI., 827.



CHAPTER VI

MYTHOLOGY

PLATO has the distinction of being the poet-philosopher among the thinkers of the world. He had a mind that laid the foundations for pure speculative metaphysics and at the same time he was gifted with an imagination that so blended itself with his most abstruse thinking that it is difficult to separate his science from his metaphors. And these in the extended form of myths or apologues have such brilliancy of their own that they make the reading of Plato an enjoyment such as only poetry in its highest flights can afford. His myth of the charioteer and the two horses in the *Phædrus*, the narrative of Er the son of Armenius in the *Republic*, the figure of the cave in the same dialogue, the myths concerning the origin of love in the *Banquet*—merely to mention a few examples—have imprinted themselves in the human memory, as Emerson observes, like the signs of the zodiac. Thus a study of the in-

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fluence of Platonism must attend to the imaginative side of Plato's art as well as to his philosophical teaching. This is especially true of a study of Emerson's Platonism, for his was a temperament in which imagination was highly developed. Feeding naturally on the doctrines of Platonism, he was influenced by Plato's manner of using myths or fables to set forth his teachings.

In *The American Scholar* Emerson uses a fable to convey his leading conception—the nature of the scholar. "It is one of those fables," he writes, "which out of an unknown antiquity convey an unlooked-for wisdom, that the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end. The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man."¹

The source of this fable is to be found in Plato's *Banquet*. There Aristophanes tells of the nature of original men: "The entire form of every individual of the human race

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 82.

was rounded, having the back and sides as in a circle. It had four hands, and legs equal in number to the hands; and two faces upon the circular neck, alike in every way, and one head on both the faces placed opposite, and four ears . . . and from these it is easy to conjecture how all the other parts were doubled.”¹ Such mortals were terrible in force—the narrative proceeds—and became so threatening in their attempts to attack the gods in heaven that Jupiter determined to halve them in order to weaken their strength. Taylor in a note to his translation refers to the fable as one “which I doubt not is of greater antiquity than Plato.”²

With this fable Emerson blends an account of the use of brothers which Plutarch gives in his essay, *Of Brotherly Love*. “And Nature hath given us very near examples of the use of brothers, by contriving most of the necessary parts of our bodies double, as it were, brothers and twins—as hands, feet, ears, nostrils—thereby telling us that all these were thus distinguished for mutual benefit and assistance, and not for variance and discord. And when she parted the very hands into many and un-

¹ Bohn translation, III., 508-509.

² *The Works of Plato*, III., 475, note 1.



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equal fingers, she made them thereby the most curious and artificial of all our members; in so much that the ancient philosopher Anaxagoras assigned the hands for the reason of all human knowledge and discretion. But the contrary seems the truth. For it is not man's having hands that makes him the wisest animal, but his being naturally reasonable and capable of art was the reason why such organs were conferred upon him. And this also is most manifest to every one, that the reason why Nature out of one seed and source formed two, three, and more brethren was not for difference and opposition, but that their being apart might render them the more capable of assisting one another. For those that were treble-bodied and hundred-handed, if any such there were, while they had all their members joined to each other could do nothing without them or apart."¹

From Plato, then, Emerson got the idea of the gods dividing man into men; from Plutarch came the reason for the division, namely, to make man more helpful to himself; and from the same source came the simile of the division of the hands into fingers. Taylor's note

¹ Plutarch, *Morals*, III., 37.

formed the basis for the assignment of the fable to an unknown antiquity. Emerson's own mind fused these elements into a version quite his own. He uses it to point the moral he is inculcating; that in the various occupations in which in the divided or social state men are engaged, it is man acting now in one function, now in another; in no one is the entire man but only a part of him. Hence he treats the scholar, his topic in hand, as man thinking. It is an idea that suggests the doctrine of Universal Mind; but that is present entire to each man, whereas the One Man is present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty. Emerson, however, applies the doctrine in a way that shows the theory to be identical with his doctrine of Universal Mind. "It is remarkable," he observes, "the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads But for the evidence thence afforded to the philosophical doctrine of the identity of all minds, we should suppose some pre-established harmony, some foresight of souls that were to be, and some preparation of stores for their future wants, like the fact

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observed in insects, who lay up food before death for the young grub they shall never see.”¹

It is to be noted, however, that in one place Emerson refers this fable of One Man to Seneca. Speaking of the coldness of Seneca's virtue, he qualifies by adding, “Yet what noble words we owe to him: ‘God divided man into men, that they might help each other.’”² But the fable does not appear in Seneca. Emerson may have been led to assign it to him by recollecting the caption of one of Seneca's *Epistles* (XVII), which in his own copy reads: “The Original of all men is the same.”³ The error in assigning the fable to Seneca is not alone in Emerson's practice. In his *Nature* he assigns to Plato the sentence—“poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history”; but it belongs to Aristotle.⁴ He makes Plotinus say “the knowledge of the senses is truly ludicrous”;⁵ but it is a quotation from Proclus's treatise *On Providence and Fate*,


¹ *Complete Works*, I., 91-92.

² *Ibid.*, X., 312.

³ *Seneca's Morals by way of Abstract*, by Roger L'Es-trange, 336.

⁴ *Complete Works*, I., 69. Cf. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 35.

⁵ *Complete Works*, X., 281.



where in Emerson's own copy the passage is marked by his own hand.¹ He also refers to Plato's cave in the *Republic* as the "cave of Trophonius," which is the cave mentioned by Plutarch.² It is not strange then, that writing as Emerson did late in life, he should have assigned to Seneca what he had previously gathered from Plutarch and Plato.

Emerson uses the fable of the Sphinx to explain one of Plato's teachings. "As near and proper to us," he writes, "is also that old fable of the Sphinx, who was said to sit on the roadside and put riddles to every passenger. If the man could solve the riddle, the Sphinx was slain. What is our life but an endless flight of winged facts or events? In splendid variety these changes come, all putting questions to the human spirit. Those men who cannot answer by a superior wisdom these facts or questions of time, serve them. Facts encumber them, tyrannize over them, and make the men of routine the men of *sense*, in whom a literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man. But if the man is true to

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 472.

² *Complete Works*, IV., 83. Cf. *Plutarch's Lives*, translated by John and William Langhorne, II., 293; III., 141.

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his better instincts or sentiments, and refuses the dominion of facts, as one that comes of a higher race; remains fast by the soul and sees the principle, then the facts fall aptly and supple into their places; they know their master, and the meanest of them glorifies him.”¹

The poetical rendering of this idea is found in his poem, *The Sphinx*. There Emerson explains how the poet solves the secret which the Sphinx has been keeping for ages. This secret concerns the condition of man who seems to stand quite apart from the other members of creation. These share the eternal peace of the universe:

“But man crouches and blushes
Absconds and conceals;
He creepeth and peepeth
He palters and steals;
Infirm, melancholy,
Jealous glancing around,
An oaf, an accomplice,
He poisons the ground.”

With this difference in mind the Sphinx asks the question which the great mother Nature has put:

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 32-33.

“Who has drugged my boy’s cup?
 Who has mixed my boy’s bread?
 Who with sadness and madness
 Has turned my child’s head?”

The poet is the man who answers the question. Thus Emerson explains how the poet says to the Sphinx:

“The fiend that man harries
 Is love of the Best;
 Yawns the pit of the Dragon,
 Lit by rays from the Blest.

The Lethe of Nature
 Can’t trance him again,
 Whose soul sees the perfect,
 Which his eyes seek in vain.

“To vision profounder
 Man’s spirit must dive;
 His aye-rolling orb
 At no goal will arrive.”¹

This eternal search on the part of man for the attainment of a vision ever receding is symbolical of the truth which Plato lays down

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 22-23.



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as the distinguishing characteristic of man. In the *Phædrus* he says that "it is necessary that a man should understand according to a generic form, as it is called, which proceeding from many perceptions is by reasoning combined into one."¹ Or as Emerson renders the passage, "the essence or peculiarity of man is to comprehend a whole; or that which in the diversity of sensations can be comprised under a rational unity."² On the other hand, according to Emerson, who still quotes from the *Phædrus*, "the soul which has never perceived the truth, cannot pass into human form."³

The suggestion to use the fable of the Sphinx to set forth this teaching of Plato arose in Emerson's mind after he had read Taylor's note explaining the meaning of the fable. This note occurs on a passage in the extract from Synesius *On Providence*, appended to Taylor's translation of the *Select Works of Plotinus*. Emerson indicated the passage in his own copy by inserting at the place a slip of paper on which "Sphinx" was inscribed and by noting the passage under that

¹ Bohn translation, I., 325.

² *Complete Works*, IV., 63.

³ *Ibid.* Cf. Bohn translation, I., 325.

heading in his index. "It appears to me," the note reads, "that the ancients, by the sphinx designed to represent to us the nature of the phantasy or imagination. In order to be convinced of which, it is necessary to observe that the rational soul, or the true man, consists of intellect, *dianoia* or the discursive energy of reason, and opinion; but the fictitious man, or the irrational soul, commences from the phantasy, under which desire and anger subsist. Hence, the basis of the rational life is *opinion*, but the summit of the irrational life is phantasy. . . . But the riddles of the sphinx are images of the obscure and intricate nature of the phantasy. He, therefore, who is unable to solve the riddles of the sphinx, i. e., who cannot comprehend the dark and perplexed nature of the phantasy, will be drawn into her embraces and torn in pieces; viz., the phantasy in such a one will subject to its power the rational life, cause its indivisible energies to become divisible, and thus destroy as much as possible its very essence."¹

With the idea expressed in this note Emerson's conception of man as a thinking being who seeks principles beneath facts easily

¹ *Select Works*, 539, note 1.



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blended. The opposition between one who attends only to facts and one who grasps principles passes over to the opposition between phantasy or imagination, the highest form of the perception of sensible things, and intellect, which is a faculty of the soul superior to sense perception. With this new pair of opposing elements Emerson identifies the Sphinx and the Poet respectively. Taylor had explained the equivalence of phantasy and the Sphinx and Emerson was but expressing his own idea when he makes the poet representative of intellect.

Such an explanation does not strain the poem. In his prose account of the fable Emerson, holding to the common interpretation, says that the Sphinx sitting by the roadside "puts riddles to every passenger"; but in the poem the Sphinx herself is perplexed. She is pictured drowsy and brooding on the world; her first words are:

"Who'll tell me my secret,
The ages have kept?
I awaited the seer
While they slumbered and slept."

And the specific question she puts is that which she had heard from Nature, the great

mother, who is inquiring concerning the secret of man's condition. And the reason why the Sphinx is unable to answer the question can be inferred from the Poet's words to her:

“Dull Sphinx, Jove keep thy five wits;
Thy sight is growing blear;
Rue, myrrh, cummin for the Sphinx
Her muddy eyes to clear!”

Such a characterization points to phantasy as the function of the soul which the Sphinx represents. The five wits all feed imagination, or phantasy. And the Sphinx acknowledges as much to the poet.

“The old Sphinx bit her thick lip—
Said, ‘Who taught thee me to name?’
I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow;
Of thine eye I am eyebeam.”

That is, phantasy, or imagination, is the yoke-fellow of the poet. The union of phantasy and intellect as necessary factors in the soul's life is here indicated. It thus appears that only by following the explanation of Taylor, that is, by identifying the Sphinx with phantasy, or imagination, that we can come to



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understand what Emerson is aiming at in his poem.

This explanation also gives meaning to certain details which otherwise would remain meaningless. In Emerson's prose version of the myth we read that if one was able to solve the secret, the Sphinx was slain. Taylor's note, however, explains this as follows: "But he who, like *Œdipus*, is able to solve the enigmas of the sphinx, or, in other words, to comprehend the dark essence of his phantasy, will, by illuminating its obscurity with the light of intellect, cause it, by becoming lucid throughout, to be no longer what it was before."¹ And again: "Her [phantasy's] wings are images of the elevating powers, which the phantasy naturally possesses; for it is re-elevated in conjunction with the returning soul, to the region everyway resplendent with divine light."² In other words, phantasy when intellect functions properly is elevated and shines with a light imparted by intellect. Or as Emerson renders the change:

"Uprose the merry Sphinx
And crouched no more in stone;

¹*Select Works*, 540, note 1.

²*Ibid.*

She melted into purple cloud,
 She silvered in the moon;
 She spired into a yellow flame;
 She flowered in blossoms red;
 She flowed into a foaming wave;
 She stood Monadnoc's head."

That is, the imagination of the poet when illuminated by intellect uses things as symbols, thus translating earthly things into higher power.

It is fitting, then, that Emerson should give the last part of his poem over to Nature. It is she that had originally asked the question; the Sphinx got it from her. And so the poem properly ends with the sanction which Nature gives to the truth that the Poet has spoken.

"Through a thousand voices
 Spoke the universal dame;
 'Who telleth one of my meanings
 Is master of all I am.'"

The sentiment is that of the microcosm.

Another myth which Emerson uses to point a meaning is one which he found in his Bohn edition of Plato. There in a note to a passage in *Sisyphus*, a pseudo-Platonic dialogue, he read of "an Æsopo-Socratic fable,"

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which the editor says was "first published in a latent metrical form by De Furia, from a Vatican MS., but recently in a more complete state from an Athos MS. by Boissonade."

The English version of it runs:

"To the gods Apollo, his long arrows holding,
Spoke thus—Who knows the arrow to let fly,
Than the far-darting farther? On the strife
With Phoebus enter'd Zeus, his weapons handling.
In Ares' helmet Hermes shook the lots,
Which Phoebus first obtaining, with his hands
The bent bow pushing from him, and the string
Letting go sharply, first his arrow fix'd
Within the distant gardens of the West.
When with his stride did Zeus the distance clear,
And cried—Where shall I shoot? no space have I.
And no bow drawing, bow-man's glory gained." ¹

Emerson uses this fable to illustrate the superiority of character over talent. "It is a fine fable," he writes, "for the advantage of character over talent, the Greek legend of the strife of Jove and Phœbus. Phœbus challenged the gods, and said, 'Who will outshoot the far darting Apollo?' Zeus said, 'I will.' Mars shook the lots in his helmet, and that of Apollo leaped out first. Apollo stretched

¹ *The Works of Plato*, Bohn translation, VI, 107, note 3.

his bow and shot his arrow into the extreme west. Then Zeus rose, and with one stride cleared the whole distance, and said, 'Where shall I shoot? there is no space left.' So the bowman's prize was adjudged to him who drew no bow."¹

In his poem, *Uriel*, Emerson uses a bit of mythology of his own creation. It tells of the lapse of the archangel Uriel from his high state due to his bold philosophy of the good. The meaning of the fable is best understood when viewed in its relation to Emerson's Platonism.

Emerson held to the essential goodness of all things, including what we usually call evil. "I own I am gladdened by seeing the predominance of the saccharine principle throughout vegetable nature, and not less by beholding in morals that unrestrained inundation of the principle of good into every chink and hole that selfishness has left open, yea into selfishness and sin itself; so that no evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfactions."² "Thus a sublime confidence is fed at the bottom of the heart that, in spite of appearances, in spite of malignity and

¹ *Complete Works*, VII., 184.

² *Ibid.*, II., 317-318.

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blind self-interest living for the moment, an eternal, beneficent necessity is always bringing things right; and though we should fold our arms—which we cannot do, for our duty requires us to be the very hands of this guiding sentiment, and work in the present moment—the evils we suffer will at last end themselves through the incessant opposition of Nature to everything hurtful.”¹

This is a doctrine which Emerson found in Platonism. “Evil according to old philosophers,” he tells us, “is good in the making.”² It is to the Platonists that he refers. “Every part, indeed, of this mundane fabric and drama,” says Proclus, “has for its end good; since no part of it is left inordinate; but it is so woven with other parts, as to contribute to the well being of the universe.”³ And in his own copy of the *Select Works of Plotinus* he has indexed under “Good of Evil” a passage from Plato quoted in a note by Taylor. “Conformably to this, it is divinely said by Plato in the *Republic*: ‘Whatever comes from the Gods to the man who is beloved by the Gods, will all be the best possi-

¹ *Ibid.*, X., 188-189.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 138.

³ *On Providence and Fate*, in *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 466.

ble, unless he has some necessary ill from former miscarriage. Hence, if the just man happens to be in poverty or disease, or in any other of those seeming evils, these things issue to him in something good either alive or dead.' ”¹

It is this doctrine that the archangel Uriel refers to when he expressed the sentiment that caused his lapse.

“Line in nature is not found;
Unit and universe are round;
In vain produced, all rays return;
Evil will bless, and ice will burn.’ ”

And though obscured in his fall, Uriel’s voice of scorn was still heard shrilling, “Out of the good of evil born”—a sentiment that filled the old gods with fear.

But Emerson owes to Plotinus not only the central idea of the poem, but the manner of its expression. Thus, in explaining himself, Uriel uses symbolical language of line and circle. Such symbolical use of geometrical terms is constant in Plato and the Platonists. “For a right line,” Proclus explains, “is imperfect, as always capable of being extended; but a circle and a sphere are most perfect, as

¹ *Select Works*, 361, note 1.

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not receiving increase, and as making the end of their motion the beginning." ¹ Uriel thus, in giving his sentiment "against the being of a line," was talking the language of Platonism.

In fabricating the fable, too, Emerson draws on the notions of Platonism for certain details. Of the time of Uriel's lapse Emerson writes:

"It fell in the ancient periods
Which the brooding soul surveys,
Or ever the wild Time coined itself
Into calendar months and days."

This conception of time is that of Plato in the *Timæus*. Time is there defined as an image of eternity and was created by the Demiurgus along with the universe. "But besides this," Plato adds, "he contrived the days and nights, months and years, which had no existence prior to the universe, but rose into being contemporaneously with its formation." ² The time of Uriel's lapse was in that eternal period before time was.

Again, the nature of the punishment that Uriel suffers is that frequently referred to by Plato and the Platonists. In Plato the trans-

¹ *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato*, II., 445.

² Bohn translation, II., 341.

migration of the soul is more than once indicated;¹ and in Plotinus the reasons for the lapse of the soul into the world of matter are given. "The assertions, therefore," Plotinus says, "are by no means discordant with each other, which declare that souls are sown in generation, and that they descend for the sake of causing the perfection of the universe; likewise that they are condemned to suffer punishment, and are confined in a cave."² Adopting the hint of the lapse of the soul into the realms of generation and its transmigration therein, Emerson says of Uriel:

"A sad self-knowledge, withering, fell
On the beauty of Uriel;
In heaven once eminent, the god
Withdrew, that hour, into his cloud;
Whether doomed to long gyration
In the sea of generation,
Or by knowledge grown too bright
To hit the nerve of feebler sight."³

In closing his essay, *Manners*, Emerson appears a second time as an inventor of a fable out of suggestions he found in his Platonic

¹ Bohn translation, I., 325; II., 347.

² *Five Books*, 270-271. Cf. *Complete Works*, IX., 410.

³ *Complete Works*, IX., 114.



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sources. Speaking of the character of human society, he observes: "Too good for banning, and too bad for blessing, it reminds us of a tradition of the pagan mythology, in any attempt to settle its character. 'I overheard Jove, one day,' said Silenus, 'talking of destroying the earth; he said it had failed; they were all rogues and vixens, who went from bad to worse, as fast as the days succeeded each other. Minerva said she hoped not; they were only ridiculous little creatures, with this odd circumstance, that they had a blur, or indeterminate aspect, seen far or seen near; if you called them bad, they would appear so; if you called them good, they would appear so; and there was no one person or action among them which would not puzzle her owl, much more all Olympus, to know whether it was fundamentally bad or good.'"¹

This fable appears to be a presentation in dialogue form of an idea which Emerson noted in his Plutarch. There, in his essay *Of Isis and Osiris*, in a passage marked by Emerson's own hand, can be read: "For the harmony of the world is (according to Heraclitus) like that of a bow or a harp, alternately

¹ *Ibid.*, III., 155.

tightened and relaxed; and according to Euripides,

Nor good nor bad here's to be found apart; 1
But both immixed in one, for greater art.

And, therefore, this most ancient opinion hath been handed down from the theologians and law-givers to the poets and philosophers, it having an original fathered upon none, but having gained a persuasion both strong and indelible, and being everywhere professed and received by barbarians as well as Grecians—and that not only in vulgar discourses and public fame, but also in their secret mysteries and open sacrifices—that the world is neither hurried about by wild chance without intelligence, discourse and direction, nor yet that there is but one reason, which as it were with a rudder or with gentle and easy reins directs it and holds it in; but that, on the contrary, there are in it several differing things, and those made up of bad as well as good; or rather (to speak more plainly) that Nature produces nothing here but what is mixed and tempered.”¹ By appropriating this view of the world and assigning characters Emerson

¹ *Morals*, IV., 105-106.

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was able to work out a fable in which he sums up his teaching on the matter in hand.

In another instance Emerson expresses a familiar idea of Platonism through a fable which he says "seems somehow to have been dropped from the current mythologies."¹

"Saturn grew weary of sitting alone, or with none but the great Uranus or Heaven beholding him, and he created an oyster. Then he would act again, but he made nothing more, but went on creating the race of oysters. Then Uranus cried, 'A new work, O Saturn! the old is not good again.'

"Saturn replied, 'I fear. There is not only the alternative of making and not making, but also of unmaking. Seest thou the great sea, how it ebbs and flows? so it is with me; my power ebbs; and if I put forth my hands, I shall not do, but undo. Therefore I do what I have done; I hold what I have got; and so I resist Night and Chaos.'

"'O Saturn,' replied Uranus, 'thou canst not hold thine own but by making more. Thy oysters are barnacles and cockles, and with the next flowing of the tide they will be pebbles and sea foam.'

"'I see,' rejoins Saturn, 'thou art in league

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 296.

with Night, thou art become an evil eye; thou spakest from love; now thy words smite me with hatred. I appeal to Fate, must there not be rest?'—'I appeal to Fate, also,' said Uranus, 'must there not be motion?'—But Saturn was silent, and went on making oysters for a thousand years.

"After that, the word of Uranus came into his mind like a ray of the sun, and he made Jupiter; and then he feared again; and nature froze, the things that were made went backward, and to save the world, Jupiter slew his father Saturn."¹

The fable sets forth the opposition between the principle of motion and the principle of rest. Emerson identifies the one with Innovation and the other with Conservatism. They are the two principles in accordance with which Plato builds up his conception of the world of matter and of the world of pure ideas; and they were inherited from the Pythagorean speculation on the universe as a harmony of mutually antagonistic elements. It is a familiar idea in Emerson and here he uses Plato's manner of mythologizing in order to express the truth.

At the close of his essay on *Immortality*

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 296-297.

Emerson recounts a fable which he had probably met with in one of his Hindoo books.¹ It deals with the reluctance of Yama, the lord of Death, to fulfill his promise to Nachiketas, the son of Gautama, which was to grant him three boons of his own choice. Two he willingly granted, but the third, which was a request to unfold the history of the soul after death, Yama at first declines to answer; but Nachiketas growing so importunate, he speaks to him of the eternal nature of the soul. This Indian fable is used by Emerson much in the manner of Plato in his *Phædo*, where, after the philosophic discussion on immortality, one of the characters tells a fable of the other world.²

Associated with these fables of Emerson's are his utterances which he assigns to "his Orphic poet." This is no other person than Emerson himself, who is working out a suggestion he found in Proclus. "He who desires to signify divine concerns through symbols in Orphic," says Proclus, "and, in short, accords with those who write fables concerning the gods."³ He uses this sugges-

¹ *Ibid.*, VIII., 349-352.

² Bohn translation, I., 117, et sq.

³ *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 12.

tion in his *Nature* and also in his essay, *The Poet*, although in this latter reference the poet is not styled Orphic.

In *Nature* this Orphic poet sings some traditions of man and nature. Among his utterances are these words: "Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and moon; from man the sun, from woman the moon. The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions externized themselves into day and night, into year and the seasons. But, having made for himself this huge shell, his waters retired; he no longer fills the veins and veinlets; he is shrunk to a drop. He sees that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, once it fitted him, now it corresponds to him from far and on high. He adores timidly his own work. Now is man the follower of the sun and woman the follower of the moon. Yet sometimes he starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance betwixt him and it. He perceives that if his law is still paramount, if still he have elemental power, if his word is sterling yet in nature, it is not conscious

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power, it is not inferior, but superior to his will. It is instinct."¹

The underlying idea is the familiar one of the mysterious relation of man to nature. In explaining it Emerson had used the doctrines of Platonism, as has already been indicated. But in this instance he has seized upon certain suggestions found in the Platonists and attempted to work them into a semblance of a tradition or fable.

Iamblichus gave him the idea that man is but a dwarf of himself. In his *Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians* Iamblichus had written: "I say, therefore, that the more divine intelligible man, who was formerly united to the Gods by the vision of them, afterwards entered into another soul, which is coadapted to the human form, and through this became fettered with the bonds of necessity and fate."²

In Proclus Emerson found the suggestion that out of man sprang the sun and moon. Speaking of the goddess Athena, Proclus says: "But the Egyptians relate, that in the adytum of the Goddess [Athena] there was this inscription: 'I am the things that are, that will

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 71-72.

² p. 332.

be, and that have been. No one has ever laid open the garment by which I am concealed. The fruit which I brought forth was the sun.'"¹

Such a conception is in keeping with the idea that the Platonists held: that visible things are effluxious from the gods. Plutarch's essay, *Of Isis and Osiris*, contains many instances of such an interpretation. Emerson himself, in another place, quotes Proclus to the effect that "gold and silver grow in the earth from the celestial gods—an effluxion from them."² It was natural, then, for him to carry over the idea to man in his former union with the Divine. Nature thus became an effluxion from man's spirit.

The idea that man is now a follower of the sun is, perhaps, a recollection of Plutarch's remark: "We appear to be passionately in love with the sun."³ And the sun, he says, interferes with spiritual vision "by sense withdrawing the rational intellect from that which is to that which appears."⁴

The suggestion that woman is a follower of the moon may have arisen in Emerson's mind

¹ *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato*, I., 82.

² *Complete Works*, X., 272.

³ *Morals*, IV., 294.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III., 82.

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as a natural parallel. Perhaps, however, Plutarch's comparison of Venus to the moon in his dialogue, *Of Love*, may have been in Emerson's thought, especially as it occurs in a passage where the god of love is compared to the Sun.¹

If this reasoning be true, and it is not a strained analysis, Emerson's utterances as Orphic poet would be an instance of the truth of the remark he makes on Plutarch—"A poet might rhyme all day with hints drawn from Plutarch, page on page."²

It thus becomes quite evident that teaching by myth, fable or apologue is a favorite way of Emerson's. Emerson's myths are, of course, much inferior to Plato's in depth and in brilliancy, but they testify to a conscious effort on Emerson's part to follow at a distance in the distinctly Platonic manner of blending philosophy and poetry.

As was seen in the explanation of the *Sphinx*, Emerson is careful to rationalize the myths that interested him. It was a practice which Plato himself had used in his searching criticism of the old Greek myths. In the later Platonists myths are frequently ration-

¹ *Ibid.*, IV., 293.

² *Complete Works*, X., 301.

alized. In his copy of *On the Theology of Plato* Emerson had indexed a passage, "Mythology," which taught that the "mythological mode which indicates divine concerns through conjectures is ancient, concealing truth under a multitude of veils, and proceeding in a manner similar to nature, which extends sensible figments of intelligibles, material, of immaterial, partible, of impartible natures, and images, and things which have a false being, of things perfectly true."¹ Into this habit Emerson himself falls.

The myth of Pan held Emerson's attention. He gives it two interpretations. "The mythology," he observes, "cleaves close to Nature; and what else was it they represented in Pan, god of shepherds, who was not yet completely finished in godlike form, blocked rather, and wanting the extremities; had emblematic horns and feet? Pan, that is, All. His habit was to dwell in mountains, lying on the ground, tooting like a cricket in the sun, refusing to speak, clinging to his behemoth ways. He could intoxicate by the strain of his shepherd's pipe—silent yet to most, for his pipes make the music of the spheres, which, because it sounds eternally, is not heard at all

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 13.

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by the dull, but only by the mind. He wears a coat of leopard spots or stars. He could terrify by earth-born fears called *panics*. Yet was he in the secret of Nature and could look both before and after. He was only seen under disguises, and was not represented by any outward image; a terror sometimes, at others a placid omnipotence.”¹

This account seems to be largely built out of materials Emerson found in Cudworth. In a passage, which Emerson had indexed, “Pan,” Cudworth gives a quotation from a Platonist named Phornutus, who thus describes Pan: “‘The lower parts of Pan (saith he) were rough and goatish, because of the asperity of the earth; but his upper parts of a human form, because the ether being rational and intellectual, is the Hegemonic of the world’; adding hereunto, ‘that Pan was feigned . . . to be clothed with the skin of a libbard, because of the bespangled heavens, and the beautiful variety of things in the world; to live in a desert, because of the singularity of the world; and, lastly, to be a good demon by reason of the *προσιωὸς αὐτοῦ λόγος*, that supreme mind, reason, and understand-

¹ *Complete Works*, XII., 35-36.

ing, that governs all in it.'"¹ In a second passage Cudworth adds: "First of all, Pan, as the very word plainly implies him to be a universal Numen, and as he was supposed to be the Harmostes of the whole world, or to play upon the world as a musical instrument, according to that of Orpheus (or Onomacritus):

Ἀρμονίαν κόσμου κρέκων φιλοπαίγμονι μολπή.

So have we before showed that by him the Arcadians and Greeks meant, not the corporeal world inanimate, nor yet as endued with a senseless nature only, but as proceeding from an intellectual principle or divine spirit, which framed it harmoniously; and as being still kept in tune, acted and governed by the same."²

And again Cudworth says: "The ancient mythologists represented the nature of the universe by Pan playing upon a pipe or harp . . . ; as if nature did, by a silent melody, make all the parts of the universe everywhere dance in measure and proportion, itself being as it were in the meantime de-

¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 583.

² *Ibid.*, II., 208.

lighted and ravished with the re-echoing of its own harmony." ¹

In interpreting this myth, however, Emerson does not follow Cudworth. Cudworth identifies Pan with God; but Emerson sees in the myth either a representation of instinct or of man. "Such homage," he says of it, "did the Greek—delighting in accurate form, not fond of the extravagant and unbounded—pay to the inscrutable force we call Instinct, or Nature when it first becomes intelligent." ² And in another place he holds: "The great Pan of old, who was clothed in a leopard skin to signify the beautiful variety of things, and the firmament, his coat of stars—was but the representative of thee, O rich and various Man! thou palace of sight and sound, carrying in thy senses the morning and the night and the unfathomable galaxy; in thy brain, the geometry of the City of God; in thy heart, the bower of love and the realms of right and wrong." ³

In his poetry, however, Emerson adopts the notion of Cudworth that Pan represented God who is infused into all things. Hence,

¹ *Ibid.*, I., 242.

² *Complete Works*, XII., 36.

³ *Ibid.*, I., 205-206.

in the poem, *Pan*, he uses the idea to set forth his favorite doctrine of the Over-Soul.

"O what are heroes, prophets, men,
But pipes through which the breath of Pan doth
blow

A momentary music. Being's tide
Swells hitherward, and myriads of forms
Live, robed with beauty, painted by the sun;
Their dust, pervaded by the nerves of God,
Throbs with an overmastering energy
Knowing and doing. Ebbs the tide, they lie
White hollow shells upon the desert shore,
But not the less the eternal wave rolls on
To animate new millions, and exhale
Races and planets, its enchanted foam."¹

With Cudworth, too, Emerson agrees in the use of the myth of Proteus. In Plato there are several references to that figure as an elusive being, constantly changing form; but it is Cudworth who applies the idea to the ever-changing flux in the world of matter. In a long passage on the eternal change in nature, which Emerson has marked in his own copy, Cudworth says that the "matter of the universe is always substantially the same, and neither more nor less, but only Proteanly

¹ *Ibid.*, IX., 360.



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transformed into different shapes.”¹ And, in like manner, Emerson observes: “The philosophical perception of identity through endless mutations of form makes him know the Proteus. What else am I who laughed or wept yesterday, who slept last night like a corpse, and this morning stood and ran? And what see I on any side but the transmigrations of Proteus?”²

Emerson also adopts the view of the Platonists who see hidden meanings in the defects which are associated with certain mythological characters. “In the old mythology, mythologists observe,” says Emerson, “defects are ascribed to divine natures, as lameness to Vulcan, blindness to Cupid, and the like—to signify exuberances.”³ In keeping with this idea of Cupid is Emerson’s conception of the piercing quality of love’s vision, though love is usually represented as a blind god. The poem, *Cupido*, turns on this thought:

“The solid, solid universe
Is pervious to Love;
With bandaged eyes he never errs,

¹ *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 68.

² *Complete Works*, II., 31-32.

³ *Ibid.*, III., 18. Cf. IX., 72.

Around, below, above.
His blinding light
He flingeth white
On God's and Satan's brood,
And reconciles
By mystic wiles
The evil and the good." ¹

Emerson's authority for this manner of interpreting the defects of divine natures is Proclus. In his *Commentaries on the Timæus of Plato* is written: "It must be carefully observed, that *defects* when ascribed to divine natures adumbrate *transcendencies*; just as those whose eyes are filled with solar light, are said to be *incapable* of perceiving mundane objects; for this *incapacity* is nothing more than transcendency of vision. In like manner, the lameness of Vulcan symbolically indicated his exemption from any defective progression." ² Emerson's explanation of the blindness of Cupid is an example contributed by himself.

In Plutarch Emerson found a bit of mythology which he uses in characteristic fashion. Plutarch says: "The sun never transgresses its limited measures, as Hera-

¹ *Ibid.*, IX, 257.

² I., 120, note 1.

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clitus says: if it did do so, the Furies, which are the attendants of Justice, would find it out and punish it.”¹ This piece of mythology Emerson identifies with the doctrine of Nemesis, which he holds underlies the conception of compensation. “This is that ancient doctrine of Nemesis,” he tells us, “who keeps watch in the universe and lets no offence go unchastised. The Furies, they said, are attendants on justice, and if the sun in heaven should transgress his path they would punish him.”²

But no phase of ancient mythology did Emerson more carefully explain in terms of human experience than the belief in Dæmons, as they are treated in the writings of Plato and the Platonists. He used details concerning them in elaborating his conception in *Dæmonic Love*; but what is more he is careful to state the modern equivalent of the Dæmon. Thus, in a review of certain phases of demonology, he shows little regard for the significance of dreams or omens. “But the faith in peculiar and alien power,” he adds, “takes another form in the modern mind, much more resembling the ancient doctrine of

¹ *Morals*, III., 26.

² *Complete Works*, II., 107.

the guardian genius. The belief that particular individuals are attended by a good fortune which makes them desirable associates in any enterprise of uncertain success, exists not only among those who take part in political and military projects, but influences all joint action of commerce and affairs, and a corresponding assurance in the individuals so distinguished meets and justifies the expectation of others by a boundless self-trust.

. . . This faith is familiar in one form—that often a certain abdication of prudence and foresight is an element of success; that children and young persons come off safe from casualties that would have proved dangerous to wiser people. We do not think the young will be forsaken; but he is fast approaching the age when the sub-miraculous external protection and leading are withdrawn and he is committed to his own care. The young man takes a leap in the dark and alights safe. As he comes into manhood, he remembers passages and persons that seem, as he looks at them now, to have been supernaturally deprived of injurious influence on him. His eyes were holden that he could not see. But he learns that such risks he may no longer run. He observes, with pain, not that



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he incurs mishaps here and there, but that his genius, whose invisible benevolence was tower and shield to him, is no longer present and active.”¹

In another place, he explains the meaning of a presiding genius as held by the ancients by writing: “We recognize obscurely the same fact, though we give it our own names. We say that every man is entitled to be valued by his best moment. We measure our friends so. We know they have intervals of folly, whereof we take no heed, but wait these appearances of the genius, which are sure and beautiful. On the other side, everybody knows people who appear bedridden, and who, with all degrees of ability, never impress us with the air of free agency. They know it, too, and peep with their eyes to see if you detect their sad plight. We fancy, could we pronounce the solving word and disenchant them, the cloud would roll up, the little rider would be discovered and unseated, and they would regain their freedom. The remedy seems never to be far off, since the first step into thought lifts this mountain of necessity. Thought is the pent air-ball which

¹ *Complete Works*, X., 15-16.

can rive the planet, and the beauty which certain objects have for him is the friendly fire which expands the thought and acquaints the prisoner that liberty and power await him."¹

In such exposition of the meaning of a presiding genius Emerson is treating in his own way a subject which Plutarch, in his *Discourse Concerning Socrates' Dæmon*, had already handled and which in Proclus is the occasion for much speculation. Without adopting the views of either, Emerson maintains his independence, while at the same time engaged in a solution of the question which Socrates' utterances concerning his Dæmon had raised.

Thus it is evident that reading in the Platonists fed the moralizing tendency in Emerson's mind and afforded him interpretations of parts of ancient mythology which he either adopts as his own or with such changes as he wished to make in them. And just as he gathered homely proverbs, so he attended to the collection of such myths as attracted his attention in his reading. He found them significant expressions of the Universal Mind.

¹ *Ibid.*, VI., 287-288.



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And thus the practice of using fables to set forth his teaching and the habit of rationalizing myths testify to the influence of the literary and critical side of Platonism on his own work.

CHAPTER VII

THE ASCENDENCY OF PLATONISM

THE works of Plato and the Platonists were great storehouses from which Emerson drew the material of his thought on nature, soul, love, beauty, art and mythology. His indebtedness to Platonism is thus an assured thing. But Emerson had read thoughtfully, if not widely, in other provinces of literature and philosophy, and in the course of that reading had gathered much that he worked into his essays. But no body of thought did he esteem as highly as Platonism. "Plato is philosophy," he maintained, "and philosophy is Plato."¹ Imbued with this idea, he either deliberately leavened the suggestions that came to him through non-Platonic sources with the leaven of Platonism, or he openly criticized the new thought from the standpoint of Platonic theory. There thus remains the consideration of the significant phases of Emerson's thinking in which

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 40.

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Platonism though blended with other thought is seen in the ascendent.

In the writings of Oriental peoples, especially the Hindoos, Emerson found much congenial reading. In his library these volumes of the ancient East were assigned to a position on his shelves close to the Platonists; and in his thought the teachings of both were most intimately associated; for both dwelt on the fundamental unity of things. In his essay on Plato he uses long quotations from his Eastern books to explain the idea of the ineffable One of the Platonists. "The raptures of prayer and ecstasy of devotion," he explicitly states, "lose all being in one Being. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Geeta, and the Vishnu Purana. Those writings contain little else than this idea, and they rise to pure and sublime strains in celebrating it."¹

Emerson holds, too, that Plato drew certain elements of his thought from the East, whither, perhaps, he journeyed.² He also maintains that the influence of the East was

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 49.

² *Ibid.*, 42.



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an important factor in the development of the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and his followers. "When Orientalism in Alexandria found the Platonists," he told the auditors in his Harvard course on philosophy, "a new school was produced. The sternness of the Greek school, feeling its way forward from argument to argument, met and combined with the beauty of Orientalism. Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry, and Jamblicus were the apostles of the new philosophy."¹ Orientalism and Platonism were thus intimately associated in his survey of the philosophy of the ancient world.

This association of the sacred writers of the East with Plato and the Platonists may have arisen from Emerson's adoption of the critical attitude of Cousin. That French philosopher was interested both in Greek thought and in the books of the East. He maintained that the origins of Grecian culture and philosophy are to be found in the sacred books of the Oriental peoples.² He denominated Asia the land whose fundamental character is unity; where all the elements of human nature lay enveloped indistinct within each other; while Greece was the land in which these


¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, LI., 826.

² *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, 42.

Greece is the land of c
freedom.²

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erences to the same topic.
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sons,—self, even,—are successive *maias* (deceptions) through which Vishnu mocks and instructs the soul.”¹

In Emerson illusion becomes variety and variety his favorite philosophers had taught him to connect with identity. Thus toward the end of his essay, *Illusions*, he writes: “The early Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Xenophanes measured their force on this problem of identity. Diogenes of Apollonia said that unless the atoms were made of one stuff, they could never blend and act with one another. But the Hindoos, in their sacred writings, express the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity and of that illusion which they conceive variety to be.”² Having thus identified illusions with variety, Emerson was able to resort to Platonic doctrine to explain the nature of the constant element amid all illusions.

In his poem, *Illusions*, Emerson applies his teaching of the permanency of law in the world. Coleridge had taught him how to interpret Plato’s conception of the idea as the only constant thing in a world of perpetual flux by identifying it with the law which the

¹ *Complete Works*, VIII., 14-15.

² *Ibid.*, VI., 324.


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mind finds operating in nature. Thus after a statement of the flowing of all mortal things, ever mutable and ever vanishing into vain illusions, he gives in his second stanza the assurance that—

“When thou dost return
On the wave’s circulation,
Behold the shimmer,
The wild dissipation,
And, out of endeavor
To change and to flow,
The gas becomes solid,
And phantoms and nothings
Return to be things,
And endless imbroglio
Is law and the world.”¹

In a second instance he falls back on a familiar tenet of his Platonism that beneath all things there is one constant stuff. The element of permanency is here conceived not as law but in a more physical way as a primal world-matter according to the old partialists among the Greek thinkers. “Such are the days,” he writes, “the earth is the cup, the sky is the cover, of the immense bounty of Nature which is offered us for our daily aliment; but

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 287-288.



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what a force of *illusion* begins life with us and attends us to the end! We are coaxed, flattered and duped from morn to eve, from birth to death; and where is the old eye that ever saw through the deception? The Hindoos represent Maia, the illusory energy of Vishnu, as one of his principal attributes. As if, in this gale of warring elements which life is, it was necessary to bind souls to human life as mariners in a tempest lash themselves to the mast and bulwarks of a ship, and Nature employed certain illusions as her ties and straps,—a rattle, a doll, an apple, for a child; skates, a river, a boat, a horse, a gun, for the growing boy; and I will not begin to name those of the youth and adult, for they are numberless. Seldom and slowly the mask falls and the pupil is permitted to see that all is one stuff, cooked and painted under many counterfeit appearances.”¹

In another mood he asserts that beneath the illusions of time is eternity and thus with Plato conceives of time as the image of eternity. “In stripping time of its illusions, in seeking to find what is the heart of the day, we come to the quality of the moment, and drop the duration altogether. It is the

¹ *Complete Works*, VII., 172.

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depth at which we live and not at all the surface extension that imports. We pierce to the eternity, of which time is the flitting surface; and, really, the least acceleration of thought and the least increase of power of thought, make life to seem and to be a vast duration. We call it time; but when that acceleration and that deepening take effect, it acquires another and a higher name.”¹

Finally, Emerson finds the stay amid the illusions of life in an experience which is reminiscent of the mystic experience of Plotinus. The most famous of Plotinus' descriptions and the one which impressed Emerson most deeply is that closing sentence of the *Select Works*. “This, therefore, is the life of the Gods, and of divine and happy men, a liberation from all terrene concerns, a life unaccompanied with human pleasures, and a flight of the alone to the alone.”² The loneliness of the experience echoes in the closing paragraph of Emerson's essay, *Illusions*: “There is no chance and no anarchy in the universe. All is system and gradation. Every god is there sitting in his sphere. The young mortal enters the hall of the firmament;

¹ *Ibid.*, VII., 183.

² p. 506.



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there is he alone with them alone, they pouring on him benedictions and gifts, and beckoning him up to their thrones. On the instant, and incessantly, fall snow-storms of illusions. He fancies himself in a vast crowd which sways this way and that and whose movement and doings he must obey; he fancies himself poor, orphaned, insignificant. The mad crowd drives hither and thither, now furiously commanding this thing to be done, now that. What is he that he should resist their will, and think or act for himself? Every moment new changes and new showers of deceptions to baffle and distract him. And when, by and by, for an instant, the air clears and the cloud lifts a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones,—they alone with him alone.”¹

In the treatment of the Hindoo doctrine of illusions, then, Emerson comes finally to interpret it from the standpoint of those teachings of Platonism which appear constantly throughout his work. The conception of law, or idea, the identity of all things, the doctrine of time as an image of eternity—such are the familiar tenets of his Platonism that enable him to treat the subject of illusion as


¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 325.



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the equivalent of the doctrine of the flux of things. Such a hold has Platonism upon his way of viewing the illusive character of life that he even imitates the most notable passage in Plotinus in which Plotinus teaches absolute communion of the Soul with the Divine as the highest and only reality in all experience.

A second idea of the Hindoos which Emerson uses is that of the transmigration of souls. This doctrine, Emerson holds, implies the Platonic doctrine of Reminiscence. Thus he writes: "The soul having been often born, or, as the Hindoos say, 'travelling the path of existence through thousands of births,' having beheld the things which are here, those which are in heaven and those which are beneath, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge: no wonder that she is able to recollect, in regard to any one thing, what formerly she knew. 'For, all things in nature being linked and related, and the soul having heretofore known all, nothing hinders but that any man, who has recalled to mind, or, according to the common phrase, has learned, one thing only, should of himself recover all his ancient knowledge, and find out again all the rest; if he have but courage, and faint not in the midst of his researches. For



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inquiry and learning is reminiscence all.' How much more if he that inquires be a holy and god-like soul! For by being assimilated to the original soul, by whom and after whom all things subsist, the soul of man does then easily flow into all things, and all things flow into it; they mix; and he is present and sympathetic with their structure and law."¹

This passage is characteristic of Emerson's treatment of Platonic doctrine. It is a quotation from Plato's *Meno* as given in Taylor's translation, with only minor verbal changes; and the quotation includes the whole passage (excepting the inserted clause giving the Hindoo rendering) and not merely the portion Emerson incloses in quotation marks. It also blends the doctrine of reminiscence with that of the Over-Soul which is based on the doctrine of the One as given in Plotinus. Plato thus is Neo-Platonized. And finally, it identifies the tenet of reminiscence with the Hindoo doctrine of transmigration. The conception of transmigration, then, which Emerson holds is purely a Platonic one; it has been reinterpreted so that the purely objective rendering of the idea has given way to an intellectual and mystical one.

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 96.

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The first use which Emerson made of this spiritualized doctrine of transmigration is to be found in his poem, *Bacchus*. There he prays for wine—

“Wine of wine,
Blood of the world,
Form of forms, and mould of statures,
That I intoxicated,
And by the draught assimilated,
May float at pleasure through all natures;
The bird-language rightly spell,
And that which roses say so well.”

And the wine is to be a wine of reminiscence, too.

“Pour, Bacchus! the remembering wine;
Retrieve the loss of me and mine!
Vine for vine be antidote,
And the grape requite the lote!
Haste to cure the old despair—
Reason in Nature’s lotus drenched,
The memory of ages quenched;
Give them again to shine;
Let wine repair what this undid;
And where the infection slid,
A dazzling memory revive;
Refresh the faded tints,
Recut the aged prints,
And write my old adventures with the pen .



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Which on the first day drew,
Upon the tablets blue,
The dancing Pleiads and eternal men.”¹

Other traces of Platonic influence appear in the poem. Plotinus holds to the contemplative activity of all things, even inanimate and Emerson reflects the same idea when he prays for wine—

“That I, drinking this,
Shall hear far Chaos talk with me;
Kings unborn shall walk with me;
And the poor grass shall plot and plan
What it will do when it is man.”²

In the title of the poem Platonism appears. Hafiz had used wine as a theme for verse but its symbolic use in Emerson is purely Platonic. “Bacchus,” explains Proclus “is the mundane intellect from which the soul and the body of the world are suspended. . . . But the theologians frequently call Bacchus *wine*, from the last of his gifts. . . .”³ The wine that the poet prays for thus becomes the intellect which in its divine intoxication is to

¹ *Complete Works*, IX., 125-127.

² *Ibid.*, IX., 126.

³ *On the Theology of Plato*, I., 216-217.




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float through all beings. And this intoxication is only the inspiration that the true poet should have. Hence it was natural that Emerson in his own copy of the *Poems* should write as a motto for his poem this sentence on poetic madness freely rendered from Plato's *Phaedrus*: "The man who is his own master knocks in vain at the doors of poetry."¹ It is quite evident, then, that the transmigration of soul in Emerson is not the physical kind the Hindoos taught but a more spiritual experience as conceived by Plato and the Platonists.

Even when Emerson does treat transmigration as an objective thing, he interprets its meaning as Cudworth, the Cambridge Platonist, had suggested. In his copy of Cudworth a marked passage reads: "But as for that other transmigration of human souls into the bodies of brutes, though it cannot be denied but that many of the ancients admitted it also, yet Timæus Locrus, and divers others of the Pythagoreans, rejected it, any otherwise than as it might be taken for an allegorical description of the beastly transformation that is made of men's souls by vice."² In the same manner Emerson writes: "The transmigra-

¹ Bohn translation, I., 321. Cf. *Complete Works IX.*, 443.

² *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, I., 70.



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tion of souls is no fable. I would it were; but men and women are only half human. Every animal of the barn yard, the field and the forest, of the earth and of the waters that are under the earth, has contrived to get a footing and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers. Ah! brother, stop the ebb of thy soul,—ebbing downward into the forms into whose habits thou hast now for many years slid.”¹

In certain other points of indebtedness to the Hindoo philosophy the persistency of Platonism is still noticeable. The name Over-Soul may well have come from the Bhagavat-Gita, as one critic has pointed out.² There the Supreme Spirit is called Adhyatma (*Adhi* meaning *above*, superior to, or presiding over; and *atma*, the *soul*,—not the soul that presides over all, but that which is above the soul itself). But the meaning which Emerson gives to the expression in his essay, *The Over-Soul* is, as already shown, that which Platonism had taught him concerning the One and its relation to the other hypostases. A Hindoo term has

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 32.

² W. T. Harris, *Emerson's Orientalism*, in *Genius and Character of Emerson*, edited by F. B. Sanborn.

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thus been filled with Greek thought; or Greek thought has been capped with an Hindoo name.

In Emerson's poem, *Brahma*, is found an expression of Emerson's doctrine of soul, or God, which is almost entirely Hindoo in its manner of speech.¹ Without a knowledge of the *Bhagavat-Gita* the poem could never have assumed the form it now has. But its doctrines of the soul—immortality and independence of time and space, to which it gives expression, are shared by the Platonist as well as the Hindoo. And the sentiment of the third stanza—

“They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings—”²

is that teaching familiar in Greek philosophy from Parmenides through Plato to the Neo-Platonists; namely, that the knower and the thing known are one; or, as the poem says—“I am the doubter and the doubt.” Emerson had used the same idea in his conception of the Over-Soul and recognized its importance

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Complete Works*, IX., 195.



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in a history of the intellect. It thus was a natural sentiment to use in a song of the soul such as *Brahma* is.

And so it is plain that in the fusion of Hindoo teaching with Platonism the latter retains its own form and is often felt as an influence transforming the Hindoo philosophy into a new product. At times the language is that of the ancient East but it veils Greek thought. When the influence of Emerson's Oriental readings comes to be worked out in all its details, it may be shown that they colored the manner of his speech and accentuated the contrast between body and spirit, but the underlying intellectualism of Emerson's mind will still claim a nearer kinship with Plato and the Platonists than with the writings of the Hindoos.

The doctrines of Christianity are a second body of thought which Emerson associates with Platonism. "Read in Plato," he says, "and you shall find Christian dogmas, and not only so, but stumble on our evangelical phrases."¹ "Calvanism," he asserts, "is in his Phædo: Christianity is in it."² It is natural, then, to examine certain phases of Christian

¹ *Ibid.*, VIII., 180.

² *Ibid.*, IV., 40.

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teaching in order to determine to what extent Emerson has interpreted them according to the doctrines of Platonism.

Sin in Emerson is viewed in its relation to intellect rather than to conscience as Christian practice views it. "There is no crime to the intellect. That is antinomian or hypernomian, and judges law as well as fact. 'It is worse than a crime, it is a blunder,' said Napoleon, speaking the language of the intellect. To it, the world is a problem in mathematics or the science of quantity and it leaves out praise and blame and all weak emotions. All stealing is comparative. If you come to absolutes, pray who does not steal? Saints are sad, because they behold sin (even when they speculate) from the point of view of the conscience, and not of the intellect; a confusion of thought. Sin, seen from the thought, is diminution, or less; seen from the conscience or will, it is pravity or bad. The intellect names it shade, absence of light, and no essence. The conscience must feel it as essence, essential evil. This it is not; it has an objective existence, but no subjective."¹

Such reasoning shows that Emerson identifies sin with evil, as conceived by the Plato-

¹ *Ibid.*, III., 79.

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nists, who held that it was non-being. As Proclus in his treatise on the *Subsistence of Evil* says, "There is not, however, such a thing as unmingled evil, and evil itself, or an eternal idea, form and essence of evil, but moral evil is mixed with good, and so far as it is good, it subsists from divinity, but so far as evil, it is derived from another cause which is impotent. For evil is nothing else than a greater or less declination, departure, defect and privation from the good itself, and which is good alone, in the same manner as darkness from the sun."¹

Emerson adopts the theory that men do evil involuntarily. "I believe not in two classes of men, but in man in two moods, in Philip drunk and Philip sober. I think according to the good-hearted word of Plato, 'Unwillingly the soul is deprived of truth.' Iron conservative, miser, or thief, no man is but by a supposed necessity which he tolerates by shortness or torpidity of sight."²

This idea is Plato's familiar doctrine. "No one," he holds, in the *Timæus*, "is voluntarily bad; but he who is depraved becomes so through a certain bad habit of body

¹ *On the Theology of Plato*, II., 500.

² *Complete Works*, III., 271.


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and an ill-governed education; and to everyone these are inimical, as they result in a certain evil." ¹

The subject of prayer is one which Emerson noted in the Platonists; in his Proclus and his Iamblichus he has indexed the most significant passages on this topic. There he found prayer in its highest form identified with the mystic union of soul with the divine. "The third and most perfect species of prayer," Iamblichus explains, "is *the seal of ineffable union with the divinities*, in whom it establishes all the power and authority of prayer; and thus causes the soul to repose in the Gods, as in a never failing port . . . It also gradually and silently draws upwards the manners of our soul, by divesting them of every thing foreign to a divine nature, and clothes us with the perfections of the Gods. Besides this, it produces an indissoluble communion and friendship with divinity, nourishes a divine love, and inflames the divine part of the soul. Whatever is of an opposing and contrary nature in the soul, it expiates and purifies; expels whatever is prone to generation, and retains anything of the dregs of mortality in its ethereal and

¹ Bohn translation, II., 402.



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splendid spirit, perfects a good hope and faith concerning the reception of divine light; and, in one word, renders those by whom it is employed the familiars and domestics of the Gods." ¹

This conception of prayer as a union with God is at the basis of Emerson's belief that a greater self-reliance must characterize our prayers. The source of the reliance is, as has already been indicated, in the dwelling of God or the One in the soul of man. Therefore he writes: "In what prayers do men allow themselves! That which they call a holy office is not so much as brave and manly. Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous. Prayer that craves a particular commodity, anything less than all good, is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and

¹ *On the Mysteries*, 271-273.



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consciousness. As soon as man is at one with God, he will not beg." ¹

In his conception of the fall of man Emerson adopts the Platonic explanation. "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas." ²

This explanation which finds the fall of man to be a deterioration in his faculty of spiritual intuition is in keeping with the theory of the descent of the soul which Proclus gives in a passage marked by Emerson.

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 77.

² *Ibid.*, III., 75-76.



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“From the beginning, therefore, and at first, the soul was united to the Gods, and its unity to their one. But afterwards the Soul departing from this divine union descended into intellect, and no longer possessed real beings unitedly, and in one, but apprehended and surveyed them by simple projections, and, as it were, contacts of its intellect. In the next place, departing from intellect, and descending into reasoning and dianoia, it no longer apprehended real beings by simple intuitions, but syllogistically and transitively, proceeding from one thing to another, from propositions to conclusions. Afterwards, abandoning true reasoning, and the dissolving peculiarity, it descended into generation, and became filled with much irrationality and perturbation.”¹

Associated with the idea of the fall of man is Emerson's teaching of imbecility as the prevailing trait of man through all the ages. “The key to the age may be this, or that, or the other, as the young orators describe; the key to all ages is—Imbecility; imbecility in the vast majority of men at all times, and even in heroes in all but certain eminent moments; victims of gravity, custom and fear. This

¹ Quoted in Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 355.

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gives force to the strong—that the multitude have no habit of self-reliance or original action.”¹

This is the teaching of Iamblichus. In a passage marked by Emerson he says: “For since it is not possible to speak rightly about the Gods without the Gods, much less can any one perform works which are of an equal dignity with divinity, and obtain the fore-knowledge of everything without [the inspiring influence of] the Gods. For the human race is imbecile, and of small estimation, sees but a little and possesses a connascent nothingness; and the only remedy of its inherent error, perturbation, and unstable mutation, is its participation, as much as possible, of a certain portion of divine light.”²

In reviewing Emerson's treatment of the doctrines of sin, evil, prayer, the fall of man, his weakness, all of which bulk so prominently in Christian dogmatics, it appears that the intellectualism of Plato and the mysticism of the Platonists determine Emerson's interpretation. Sin and evil are not positive things; they are viewed from the intellect as merely negative. The essence of prayer is the mystic

¹ *Complete Works*, VI., 54.

² *On the Mysteries*, 164.



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union of the soul with the divine which practically excludes the possibility of such simple requests as "Give us this day our daily bread." The fall of man is a lapse of intellect which begins when man ceases to live mystically united with the Divine. The intellectual quality of all this teaching attracted Emerson. The lack of this he felt in Christian teaching; that appealed to emotion rather than to intellect in man. The Platonists dwelt "in a worship which makes the sanctities of Christianity look *parvenues* and popular; for 'persuasion is in soul, but necessity is in intellect.'"¹ In that distinction, which Emerson found in Plotinus,² Emerson reveals the difference he felt between Christian and Platonic teaching. Hence results the purely intellectual character of all he has to say on Christian subjects.

The ascendancy of Platonism in Emerson's thinking appears in his relation to the transcendental philosophy of Germany. He came in contact with this thought in his reading in Coleridge. The *Biographia Literaria* and *The Friend* of Coleridge are two works which Emerson had carefully studied, and in them

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 346.

² *Select Works*, 417.



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the teachings of Kant and especially of Schelling are openly stated to have been important factors in the development of Coleridge's spiritual life. Emerson gained a further knowledge of German philosophy from an anonymous translation of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1838. This book is in his library and shows some markings and an index with entries—"Locke and Hume," "Immortality," and "Oblate Sphericity." Emerson was familiar also with an account of the systems of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling that appeared in the *Christian Examiner* for March, 1833. He valued highly Dr. James Hutchinson Stirling's *Secret of Hegel*; but as this book was not published until 1865 it could have influenced Emerson's thinking only after his main work had been done. The same is true even in a greater degree of his indebtedness to Edward Caird's *A Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant* (1877), which is also in his library. As far then as his opportunities were concerned Emerson was able even in his early period of literary activity to gain a notion of Kant's philosophy directly through translation and of the teachings of Schelling and the others through indirect sources.

But Emerson does not forget the primacy of

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Platonism in his criticism of this German philosophy. He does not regard it as an original thought product: he finds its sources in the older philosophies of Greece. "Any history of philosophy fortifies my faith," he says, "by showing me that what high dogmas I had supposed were the rare and late fruit of a cumulative culture, and only now possible to some recent Kant or Fichte—were the prompt improvisations of the earliest inquirers; of Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes."¹ "Hegel," he adds in another place, "pre-exists in Proclus, and long before, in Heraclitus and Parmenides."² Schelling's identity-philosophy couched in the statement that "all difference is quantitative," he includes among those generalizations which "do all have a kind of filial retrospect to Plato and the Greeks."³ Of Coleridge Emerson once speaks very highly as one "whose philosophy compares with others much as astronomy with other sciences; taking post at the center, and, as from a specular mount, sending sovereign glances to the circumference of things."⁴ This was said when

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 160.

² *Ibid.*, VIII., 180.

³ *Ibid.*, V., 241, 242.

⁴ J. E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I., 161.


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Emerson was but twenty-three years old; but later, when he came to review the teachings of Plato, he found Coleridge a "reader of Plato, translating into the vernacular, wittily, his good things."¹

Such relegation of Coleridge and the Germans to a dependency upon ancient Greek thought does not mean that Emerson totally ignored their work. His writings bear traces of indebtedness to German transcendentalism; but in his treatment of German thought he does not identify himself very closely with the Germans. He was content to accept the terms they used and at times he agrees with their doctrines; but true to his favorite Platonism, he always reads its meanings into these terms and consciously interprets the doctrines of the Germans in his own characteristically Platonic manner.

Emerson's conception of the transcendentalist will bear out this statement. He devotes an entire lecture to this subject. If there had been much of the German product in his mind it would surely have come to the surface. But his point of view is that of one who considers the question from a superior height. Transcendentalism is no new thing

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 39.



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to him. "The first thing we have to say respecting what are called *new views* here in New England, at the present time, is, that they are not new, but the very oldest thoughts cast into the mould of these new times . . . What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842."¹

His characterization of the Transcendentalist thus proceeds to enumerate traits which have already been seen to root themselves in Platonism. At the very heart of the philosophy of the Transcendentalist is the emanation Theory. "His experience," Emerson says, "inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him."² Out of this doctrine arises the central idea of his ethics—self-reliance.³ The Transcendentalist believes, too, "in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to a new influx

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 329.

² *Ibid.*, I., 334.

³ *Ibid.*



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of light and power; he believes in inspiration and in ecstasy.”¹ The Transcendentalists are lonely people caring little for society and at times unwilling to take an active part in its labors. But such seclusion is for the purpose of enabling them the better to keep in touch with the divine within themselves.² They are lovers of beauty, too. “In the eternal trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, each in its perfection including the three, they prefer to make Beauty the sign and head.”³

All these traits recall the characteristic teachings of Emerson which, as already pointed out, were molded after the manner of the Platonists. In fact the only connection with Kant that Emerson speaks of is through the name. He thus declares: “It is well known to most of my audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name Transcendental from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Königsburg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important

¹ *Ibid.*, 335.

² *Ibid.*, 342-354.

³ *Ibid.*, 354.



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class of ideas or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that there were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking has given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day Transcendental." ¹

Far from claiming that this name was given because of any conscious connection with the philosophy of Kant on the part of those who were called Transcendentalists, he openly states in another account that the name was given, nobody knows by whom.² And he adds that the only bond of union between the members in the group of New England Transcendentalists was that "perhaps they only agreed in having fallen upon Coleridge and Wordsworth and Goethe, then on Carlyle, with pleasure and sympathy."³

But the ascendancy of Platonism is apparent not only in Emerson's conception of the

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 339-340.

² *Ibid.*, X., 343.

³ *Ibid.*, 342.




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transcendental movement in New England but even in his manner of interpreting the doctrines of the German philosophers. This is borne out by the meaning which Emerson attaches to intuition.

Emerson himself recognizes a difference between Kant's conception of intuition and that interpretation which was generally maintained among the New England Transcendentalists. As the quotation on the origin of the name shows, Emerson sees a difference between the transcendental forms through which according to Kant experience was acquired, and simple intuitive thought. Kant has reference to the intuitions of *form* and space through which our knowledge of the external world is given; but Emerson means by intuitive thought, at least in its most important form, nothing less than the mystic experience through which the soul of man enters into divine union with God. Thus he explains that when we inquire into the nature of the aboriginal self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded, the inquiry leads us to that primary wisdom which he calls intuition as distinguished from tuition.¹ This is not a mere form of knowledge, of which we

¹ *Complete Works*, II., 64.



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become aware only by a process of reasoning on *a priori* grounds; but it is a conscious experience of the soul which is higher than knowledge. It is thus a different thing from Kant's intuition.

So too with Emerson's use of the terms Reason and Understanding. Of these he writes to his brother: "Now that I have used the words, let me ask you, Do you draw the distinction of Milton, Coleridge, and the Germans between Reason and Understanding? I think it a philosophy itself, and like all truth, very practical. Reason is the highest faculty of the soul, what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves; it simply perceives, it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues; near-sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present, the expedient, the customary." ¹

As this quotation shows the distinction antedates Kant and is found by Emerson in the seventeenth century writers; in Milton, for instance, in whom Platonism is the ruling philosophy, as indeed it was in the best minds of his time. The writings of Kant had given vogue to these terms Reason, Understanding,


¹ J. E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I., 218.

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Intuition; but as they appear in Emerson they are used in a sense which is purely in keeping with his Platonism.

It is to be observed, too, that Emerson is following Coleridge's lead in thus interpreting these terms. Coleridge tells us that he had "cautiously discriminated the terms, the reason and the understanding, encouraged and confirmed by the authority of our genuine divines and philosophers, before the Revolution."¹ He quotes a passage from Milton to support his statement, a passage which Emerson had in mind also. And he explicitly states that the use of the word *intuition* by these divines and philosophers is more inclusive than Kant's. "I take this occasion to observe," he writes, "that here and elsewhere Kant uses the terms intuition, and the verb active (*intueri* Germanice *anschauen*) for which we have unfortunately no correspondent word, exclusively for that which can be represented in space and time. He therefore consistently and rightly denies the possibility of intellectual intuitions. But as I see no adequate reason for this exclusive sense of the term, I have reverted to its wider significa-

¹ *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, III.



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tion, authorized by our elder theologians and metaphysicians, according to whom the term comprehends all truths known to us without a *medium*.”¹

This use of the term is associated with the practice of the Platonists which was followed by the seventeenth century theologians that Coleridge refers to. And it is interesting to note that Coleridge falls back upon Plotinus for an explanation of such intuitive knowledge. Thus to illustrate the character of the transcendental consciousness he quotes Plotinus: “It is not lawful to inquire from whence it sprang, as if it were a thing subject to place and motion, for it neither approached hither, nor again departs from hence to some other place; but it either appears to us or it does not appear. So that we ought not to pursue it with a view of detecting its secret source, but to watch in quiet till it suddenly shines upon us; preparing ourselves for the blessed spectacle as the eye waits patiently for the rising sun.”² Intuition thus blends in Coleridge with the mystic vision as taught in Plotinus.

Direct evidence to prove Emerson’s con-

¹ *Ibid.*, 352, note.

² *Ibid.*, III., 327-328.




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nection with Coleridge is at hand. To the doctrine of correlation of mind and matter Emerson was an enthusiastic adherent; and the perception of the relation between these two poles of thought, mind and matter, he describes as an intuition. Thus he writes: "This relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men. It appears to men, or it does not appear. When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts if at all other times he is not blind and deaf, . . . for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it."¹

The connection of this idea with Plotinus' explanation of intuition is seen in the identity of expressions. Plotinus writes of the mystic experience—"It either appears to us or it does not appear"; and Emerson echoes the language in his—"It appears to men, or it does not appear." Now, this translation of the passage of Plotinus in question appears only in Coleridge's account; it is not to be found in any of Thomas Taylor's renderings. Emerson must then have noted it in Coleridge.

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 33-34.



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It explained intuition in a manner more congenial to his way of thinking than was Kant's restricted use of the term. Intuition thus became identical with the mystic experience he dwells upon in his *Over-Soul*.

The ascendancy of Platonism is also present in Emerson's treatment of Kant's conception of morals. On the primacy of morals Kant lays great stress. A will is morally good, he holds, when it is determined solely by duty. And this duty is felt in a moral consciousness which expresses itself in the form of a demand, or a categorical imperative: Thou shalt do what the law prescribes, unconditionally, whatever consequences may result.¹

When Emerson adopts this high conception of duty, he connects the experience with the mystic union of man with the Supreme Wisdom. The perception of the moral law, he holds is "divine and deifying. It is the beatitude of man. It makes him illimitable. Through it, the soul first knows itself. It corrects the capital mistake of the infant man, who seeks to be great by following the great, and hopes to derive advantages *from another*—by showing the fountain of all good to be in himself, and that he, equally with every

¹ Friedrich Paulsen, *Immanuel Kant*, 305.



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man, is an inlet into the deeps of Reason. When he says, 'I ought'; when love warms him; when he chooses, warned from on high, the good and great deed; then, deep melodies wander through his soul from Supreme Wisdom." ¹

Out of Kant's conception of the categorical imperative comes universality as the test of all morally right conduct. The law thus becomes: Act so that thy maxim may be capable of becoming the universal natural law of all rational beings. Or as Emerson says: "He is moral—we say it with Marcus Aurelius and with Kant—whose aim or motive may become a universal rule, binding on all intelligent beings." ²

But Emerson goes on to deduce from this definition a new conception of Universal Mind. "If from these external statements," he continues after applying the rule to justice, courage, love and humility, "we come a little nearer to the fact, our first experiences in moral, as in intellectual nature, force us to discriminate a universal mind, identical in all men. Certain biases, talents, executive skills, are special to each individual; but the high,

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 125.

² *Ibid.*, X., 92.



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contemplative, all-commanding vision, the sense of Right and Wrong, is alike in all. Its attributes are self-existence, eternity, intuition and command. It is the mind of the mind. We belong to it, not it to us. It is in all men, and constitutes them men. In bad men it is dormant, as health is in men entranced or drunken; but, however inoperative, it exists underneath whatever vices and errors. The extreme simplicity of this intuition embarrasses every attempt at analysis. We can only mark, one by one, the perfections which it combines in every act. It admits of no appeal, looks to no superior essence. It is the reason of things."¹

Kant's conception of morals, then, led Emerson to restate his doctrine of Universal Mind. To that, he held firm; it is central in his beliefs. But the insight which Kant gave him into the true nature of moral conduct so impressed his mind that he was led to state his favorite doctrine in a form that would make it hold for morals as well as for the intellect. This he was ready to do because in his study of Plato he had come to realize that intellect in him is always moral.

Another instance of Emerson's interpreta-

¹ *Complete Works*, X., 93.

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tion of a teaching of German Transcendentalism is found in his treatment of Jacobi's idea that man is superior to law. Such an idea, Emerson maintains is held by the Transcendentalist. "In action he easily incurs the charge of anti-nomianism by his avowal that he, who has the Law-giver, may with safety not only neglect, but even contravene every written commandment. In the play of Othello, the expiring Desdemona absolves her husband of the murder, to her attendant Emilia. Afterwards, when Emilia charges him with the crime, Othello exclaims,

"You heard her say herself it was not I."

Emilia replies,

"The more angel she, and thou the blacker devil."

"Of this fine incident, Jacobi, the Transcendental moralist, makes use, with other parallel instances, in his reply to Fichte. Jacobi, refusing all measure of right and wrong except the determinations of the private spirit, remarks that there is no crime but has sometimes been a virtue. 'I,' he says, 'I am that atheist, that godless person who, in opposition to an imaginary doctrine of calcula-



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tion, would lie as the dying Desdemona lied; would lie and deceive, as Pylades when he personated Orestes; would assassinate like Timoleon; would perjure myself like Epaminondas and John de Witt; I would resolve on suicide like Cato; I would commit sacrilege with David; yea, and pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath, for no other reason than that I was fainting for lack of food. For I have assurance in myself that in pardoning these faults according to the letter, man exerts the sovereign right which the majesty of his being confers on him; he sets the seal of his divine nature to the grace he accords.'"¹

This account of Jacobi's belief comes from Coleridge, who gives a translation of Jacobi's letter to Fichte: "Yes, I am that atheist, that godless person, who in opposition to an imaginary doctrine of calculation, to a mere ideal fabric of general consequences that can never be realized, would lie, as the dying Desdemona lied; lie and deceive as Pylades when he personated Orestes; would commit sacrilege with David; yea and pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath, for no other reason than that I was fainting from lack of food, and that the law was made for man, and not man for the

¹ *Complete Works*, I., 336-337.

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law.”¹ In a footnote Coleridge gives the quotation from *Othello* that Jacobi refers to.

A comparison of these two passages shows the character of Emerson's additions to Jacobi's statement. The four extra historical instances which Emerson adds to Jacobi's list do not change his rendering materially; but the final sentence of Emerson's account contains a significant addition to Jacobi's words. It gives a justification of Jacobi's belief—a justification based upon a purely Platonic notion of the divine nature of man.

In adding the sentence giving this new thought Emerson had in mind a passage in his *Select Works of Plotinus*. Plotinus is writing of the union of the soul with the One, which means that the soul becomes God. To the passage Taylor appends a note which Emerson marked in his own copy and which he elsewhere makes use of.² The note reads: “Hence Aristotle in his *Politics* also says, that he who surpasses beyond all comparison the rest of his fellow citizens in virtue, ought to be considered as a God among men. He also observes, that such a one is no longer a

¹ *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, II, 285.

² *Complete Works*, X., 477.



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part of the city, that law is not for him, since he is a law to himself, and that it would be ridiculous in anyone to subject him to the laws. Let no one, however, who is not thus transcendently virtuous, fancy that law also is not for him . . . Observe, too, that when Plotinus calls the man who is able in this life to see divinity a God, he means that he is a god only according to *similitude*; for in this way, men transcendently wise and good are called by Plato, Gods and divine.”¹

The philosophy of Kant and the Germans, then, cannot be considered as the main source of Emerson's transcendentalism. He found his inspiration in a scheme of thought that antedated the appearance of the Germans by over two thousand years. He does use the terms common in that later phase of speculation. They were in the air at the time and he does not hesitate to appropriate them. But he gives them a new meaning. Such truths, too, in their scheme of morals as appealed to him he avails himself of; but the interpretation he subjects them to bespeaks the ascendancy of Platonism in his way of thinking. His indebtedness to the Germans is thus a trifling matter and what is more his use of

¹ *Select Works*, 500, note 1.


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their suggestions cannot be adequately explained unless the influence of Platonism upon them is reckoned with.

It is true, that Kant and Schelling affected Coleridge's thought. Without a knowledge of Kant's reasoning concerning the intuitions of time and space Coleridge would never have come to conceive of law as an idea which appears in mind and at the same time is present in nature. And had this correlation of law and idea not appeared in Coleridge it would have kept Emerson from interpreting one phase of Plato as he did. But the investigation of Coleridge's indebtedness to the Germans falls without the scope of the present inquiry; it is sufficient to acknowledge it.

The ascendancy of Platonism in Emerson shows itself also in the formal criticism to which he subjects the teachings of those men in whom he has been interested. In his *Representative Men* he has left his appreciation of Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe; but the defect of each is uniform; he did not measure up to that ideal which Emerson had fashioned in accordance with Platonism.

In Swedenborg Emerson was acquainted with a mind that had fed upon Platonism and



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out of it had built up its theory of symbolism. This theory was known to Plato, Emerson points out, "as is evident from his twice bisected line in the sixth book of the Republic."¹ But Swedenborg, he goes on to add "first put the fact into a detached and scientific statement, because it was habitually present to him, and never not seen."² Emerson is not, however, blind to the faults of Swedenborg's use of this theory. In working out the theory in his doctrine of the correspondences between thoughts and things, his design, Emerson holds "was narrowed and defeated by the exclusively theologic direction which his inquiries took. His perception of nature is not human and universal, but is mystical and Hebraic. He fastens each natural object to a theologic notion—a horse signifies carnal understanding; a tree, perception; the moon, faith; a cat means this; an ostrich that; an artichoke this other—and poorly tethers every symbol to a several ecclesiastic sense. The slippery Proteus is not so easily caught. In nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts, as each particle of matter circulates in turn through every system. The

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 116-117.

² *Ibid.*, 117.



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central identity enables any one symbol to express successively all the qualities and shades of real being.”¹ In other words Swedenborg’s symbolism is not developed on the abstract and universal lines that Emerson had been led by the Platonists to follow.

In his treatment of Shakespeare he applies his notion of the poet as philosopher and finds his Shakespeare wanting. As the ideal poet should do, Shakespeare “knew that a tree had another use than for apples, and corn another than for meal, and the ball of the earth, than for tillage and roads; that these things bore a second and finer harvest to the mind, being emblems of its thoughts, and conveying in all their natural history a certain mute commentary on human life. Shakspeare employed them as colors to compose his picture. He rested in their beauty; and never took the step which seemed inevitable to such genius, namely to explore the virtue which resides in these symbols and imparts this power:—what is that which they themselves say?”² In other words Shakespeare does not agree with the ideal of the poet which Emerson had developed out of his Platonic sources.

¹ *Complete Works*, IV., 120-121.

² *Ibid.*, 216-217.



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Montaigne was a writer who cast a spell over Emerson. Speaking of his work Emerson says: "It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience."¹ Yet for the scepticism for which Montaigne stands Emerson had no sympathy. "The final solution in which skepticism is lost," he writes, "is in the moral sentiment, which never forfeits its supremacy. All moods may be safely tried, and their weight allowed to all objections; the moral sentiment as easily outweighs them all, as any one. This is the drop which balances the sea. I play with the miscellany of facts, and take those superficial views which we call skepticism; but I know that they will presently appear to me in that order which makes skepticism impossible. A man of thought must feel the thought that is parent of the universe; that the masses of nature do undulate and flow. . . ."² Let a man learn to look for the permanent in the mutable and fleeting; let him learn to bear the disappearance of things he was wont to reverence without losing his reverence; let him learn that he is here, not

¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

² *Ibid.*, 183.

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to work but to be worked upon; and that, though abyss open under abyss, and opinion displace opinion, all are at last contained in the Eternal Cause . . .”¹ Skepticism in Emerson thus loses itself in mysticism as he had been taught by Plotinus to conceive it.

Of Goethe Emerson speaks at times in high praise; but his great reservation finds Goethe wanting in that high power of philosophic analysis which contents itself with nothing less than absolute unity. “I dare not say,” he writes, “that Goethe ascended to the highest grounds from which genius has spoken. He has not worshipped the highest unity; he is incapable of a self-surrender to the moral sentiment . . . He has no aims less large than the conquest of universal nature, of universal truth, to be his portion . . .”² That is, Goethe fails to satisfy that unifying tendency of Emerson’s mind which enabled him to appreciate the doctrine of the One as expounded in Plotinus and the Platonists.

It is evident that Emerson read as a Platonist. Swedenborg, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Goethe, are all held up to the ideals of Platonism and their deficiencies revealed by a

¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

² *Ibid.*, 284.



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comparison of their ideas with Emerson's conception of Platonism. He applies the same standard of judgment to the body of English literature with which he was most familiar.

In his review of the literature of England he divides its writers into Platonists, or those that elect to see identity in things, and non-Platonists, or those that chose to see discrepancies. Thus More, Hooker, Bacon, Sidney, Lord Brooke, Herbert, Browne, Donne, Spenser, Chapman, Milton, Crashaw, Norris, Cudworth, Berkeley, Jeremy Taylor are Platonists.¹

Bacon, he holds, has traits of both classes; but it is significant that Emerson dwells upon the ideal, or Platonic, element in his work. Thus he extracts from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*² an account of Bacon's *prima philosophia*, which, as has been seen, was a factor in developing Emerson's conception of the correlation of mind and matter. "Bacon, capable of ideas, yet devoted to ends," says Emerson, "required in his map of the mind, first of all, universality, or *prima philosophia*; the receptacle for all such profitable observa-

¹ *Complete Works*, V., 238.


² *Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by Basil Montagu, II., 48, 93, 126, 128, 176.



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the Bibles of the world. It is thus a collection of books which reflects his own reading and his appreciation of the worth of the Platonists in the world of literature.

The writings of Plato and the Platonists, then, were the feeding ground for Emerson's mind. Just as the landscape artist keeps in constant touch with the play of light and shade, with the form, the color and the minutest detail that awakens his sense of beauty that his canvas may give back the freshness of the scene he surveys; so Emerson, by repeated and reverent readings in the old philosophers, toned his mind in unison with their speculation that his work might have something of its calm, grand air of intellectual sovereignty. These books were to him a piece of nature and fate. And he attended only to the utterances that had a message for him. It is as if a lone, wandering astral body had swept through the old systems of thought, wrested away a fragment here, a fragment there, and so violently drawn them to itself that their impact fired the central mass with burning energy. What the attractive power of Emerson's mind is, is discernible when these fragments of thought are examined. It is a mind that is tyrannized



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ception of the metaphysical basis of all art. Thus Emerson adds to his account of Bacon: "Plato had signified the same sense, when he said, 'All the great arts require a subtle and speculative research into the law of nature, since loftiness of thought and perfect mastery over every subject seem to be derived from some such source as this. This Pericles had, in addition to a great natural genius. For, meeting with Anaxagoras, who was a person of this kind, he attached himself to him, and nourished himself with sublime speculations on the absolute intelligence; and imported thence into the oratorical art whatever could be useful to it.'"¹

Along with Emerson's division of English writers into Platonists and non-Platonists goes his emphasis upon the Platonists outside of English Literature, whom he advises us to read as truly great men. The portion of his essay, *Books*, which he devotes to such authors bulks larger than any other single group of writers. He includes Plato, Plutarch, the later Platonists, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Synesius, Iamblichus, the so-called Zoroastrian Oracles and the remains of Hermes Trismegistus. The last two he classes among

¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

His writings
then, were the fruit
of his mind. Just as
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most minutest detail
of beauty that his
freshness of the
vision, by repeated
reference to the
old philosophers,
with their speculations,
have something of
intellectual sovereignty
bestowed on him a piece of nature
intended only to the
service of him. It is
as if his astral body had sweated
out a fragment of thought, wrested
from the fragment there, and
turned to itself that their



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over by a unifying instinct, that delights in a sense of ceaseless movement or flux, that has an affinity for beauty, that finds its highest endeavor realized either in a consciousness of the moral value of the world or in a mystical union with the moral reality itself, and that insists above all else on its own independence.



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